DUNE: PROPHECY

SHIFTING THE SANDS OF TIME

SFX WELCOMES READERS FROM TOTAL FILM

SFX

GENERATION Z
JAY LYCURGO'S NEW ZOMBIE SHOW

STAR TREK
FAREWELL LOWER DECKS

BLAKE'S 7
REBELS REMIXED!

SILO
DIGGING DEEPER FOR SEASON TWO

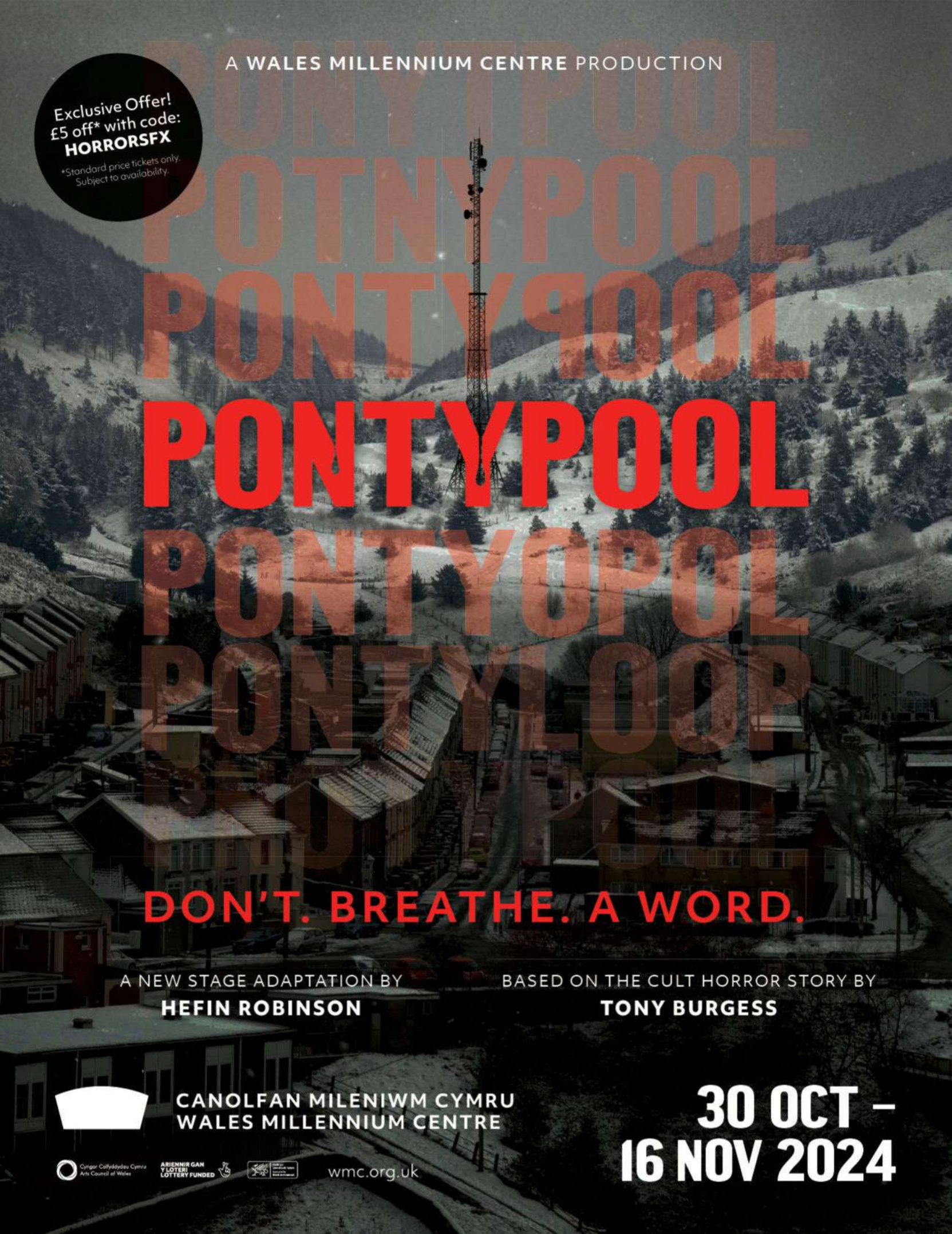
NAUTILUS
JULES VERNE MAKES A SPLASH

OZIAN EXCLUSIVE!

WICKED

JON M CHU AND HIS TEAM HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR GOOD

PLUS! BEING HUMAN | HERETIC | 2000 AD | SUPER/MAN | ARCBOUND | DOCTOR WHO
WHAT IF...? | PERCY JACKSON | OUTLANDER | THE LEGENDARY LYNX | MORK & MINDY!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Remembering *Mork & Mindy*.

Captain's Log

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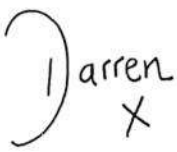
We're all very sad to say goodbye to *Total Film*, our sister title of the last 27 years, and the team behind it. It's always a terrible loss when a long-running magazine turns its final page and we'd be lying if we said things haven't been even more difficult for publishing in recent years. So when we at *SFX* say we're grateful to still have you with us, especially as we head into our 30th anniversary next year, we genuinely mean it.

We love making this magazine and – whether you've come to us as a former *Total Film* subscriber or a reader since our first issue in 1995 – we're very glad to see you.

Hopefully those of you new to *SFX* will enjoy your first issue – yes, we're all about the genre releases, but in case you didn't notice, the geeks inherited the Earth. All that nerdy stuff? Yeah, it's totally cool now.

There are big plans ahead in 2025, so please do think about taking out a subscription if you don't already. It's much cheaper, easier and you get any premium issues at an absolute steal! Tell your friends, or buy them a subscription for any special celebrations coming up – it would be a huge loss if *SFX* left the shelves. As they say in our (exclusive, thank you!) cover film story, "Together we're unlimited..."



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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Terrifier 3* is brilliant – a proper "returning slasher" like *A Nightmare On Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*.
→ So good to have *FROM* reach a third season and still be delivering.
→ The special edition of "The Happiness Patrol" is absolutely fantastic!
→ Loving *Grotesquerie*, and it's so good to see Carol back in the *Walking Dead* Universe.

RANTS

→ Gutted *Chucky* has been cancelled. Don Mancini says he'll be back – hope it's soon.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Saw *The Substance* in a cinema in Kraków. A bit on the nose in terms of its messaging, but still impressively *out there*. Hat doffed to Demi Moore for being willing to be so thoroughly deglamourised.
→ Very much looking forward to the *Blake's 7* Series One Blu-ray box set. Shall we all make *Blue Peter* teleporter bracelets to celebrate?
→ Speaking of Blake: Cult Edge's *Blake's 7 Production Diary* book on the first series was really impressive, and a series two title hits this month. See @cult_edge on Twitter for info.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Enjoyed watching Philip Glenister and Matthew Graham discussing *Life On Mars* on iPlayer. Still my fave show of the last 20 years!
→ Great to have the amazing *Silo* back on our screens, loving season two so far!

RANTS

→ Wish some of our latest shows would invest in an extra set of studio lights, it's almost impossible to see what's going on sometimes.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Can't wait to get my hands on Ramsey Campbell's new book *The Incubations* (reviewed this issue). The man's a legend, and shows no signs of slowing down.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ So great to see *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* on the big screen again, even if they were the Special Editions (I bailed on *Return Of The Jedi* – too much tinkering!).
→ I'm reading *Sherlock Holmes And The Shadwell Shadows*, the first of James Lovegrove's Holmesian crossovers with the Cthulhu mythos. Hugely enjoyable.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Jurassic World: Chaos Theory* season two is another surprising chapter in the mythology of *Jurassic World*. They even pull off an unexpected *Killing Eve*-esque sequence.
→ When *Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl* hits this holiday season, you won't be disappointed.

RANTS

→ Watching print magazines like *Total Film* disappear is a gut punch to the industry.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

DECEMBER 2024

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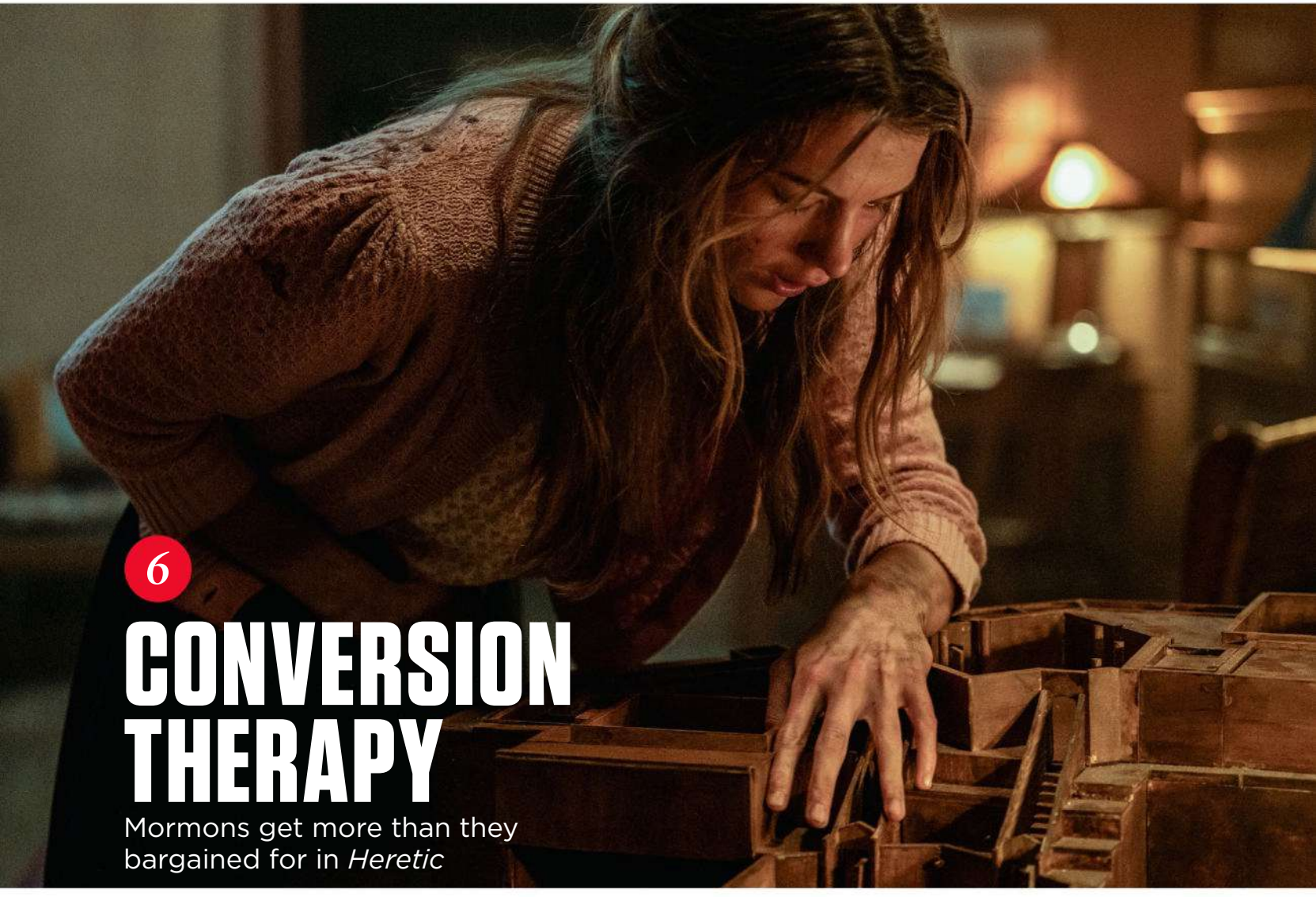

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CONVERSION THERAPY

Mormons get more than they bargained for in *Heretic*

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→ Tom Hardy swaps the symbiote for scripts in his new sci-fi comic book series.

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OUTLANDER
→ More romance, more time travel, more of season seven as part two hits screens.

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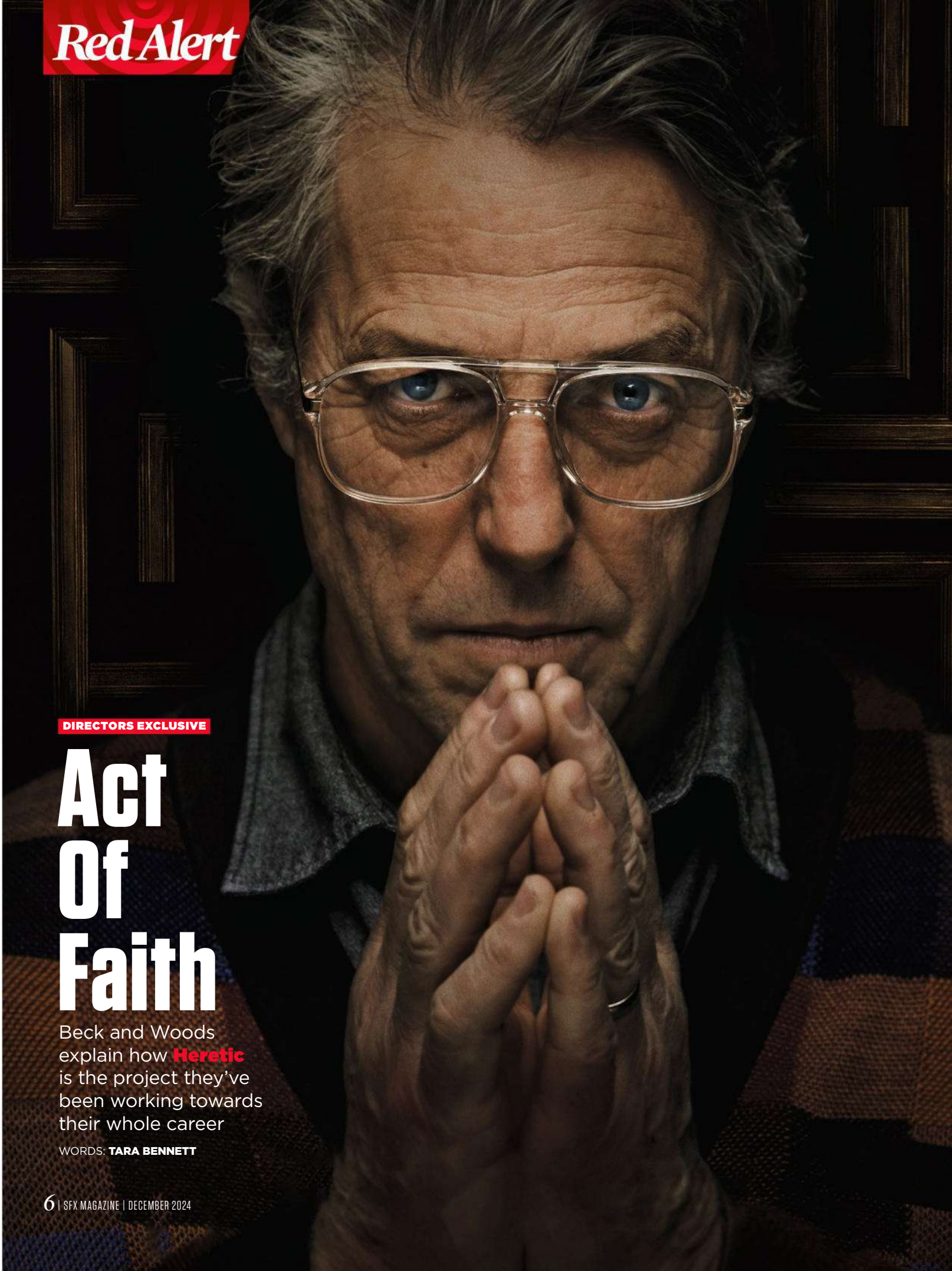
WHAT IF...?
→ Kahhori spins off from the Marvel Television series and gets her own comic book.



DIRECTORS EXCLUSIVE

Act Of Faith

Beck and Woods explain how **Heretic** is the project they've been working towards their whole career

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) lights it up.

THE BANE OF A WRITER'S existence is having the kernel of an idea that you can't quite articulate on the page. For writing/directing duo Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, the conundrum of religion, specifically other people's certitude about religion, buzzed about in their brains for years until it bloomed into their latest horror thriller *Heretic*, starring Hugh Grant, Sophie Thatcher and Chloe East.

"We've always had this ambition of doing a movie about religion for as long as I remember," Woods tells Red Alert. "Even back in high school, we talked about doing our version of [1960 film] *Inherit The Wind*, or our version of [Robert] Zemeckis's *Contact*; a thoughtful adult conversation about religion. However, back then, we had really nothing to say about religion, and didn't even really know where we fell on the spectrum."

Over the years, their views matured as they both married into other religions, made friends who practised other religions, and then wrote scripts dealing with existential issues. "In retrospect, even with *A Quiet Place*, *The Boogeyman* and *65*, there's an undercurrent of a character experiencing loss or death," Beck notes.

About a decade ago, Woods finally started their religion script by jotting down the basic idea of two Mormon missionaries who knock on the wrong door, and a discourse begins. "The concept was the inverse of *A Quiet Place*, which was, can we tell a story and scare people with no dialogue?" he says. "*Heretic* was, can we tell a story and scare people with just dialogue?"

From there it evolved into a simple three-character study of Sister Barnes and Sister Paxton responding to an inquiry at the peculiar home of one Mr Reed. "Mormonism is a very new, uniquely American religion, so it's just a little bit more accessible for people to poke and scratch at it," Woods says. "It felt like a great entry point for Mr Reed to start to dismantle all religions."

> **"Heretic was: can we tell a story and scare people with just dialogue?"**

At its core, *Heretic* is a simmering battle of ideology, featuring the verbal intimacy of a stage play situated inside a haunted house film. The vibe is potent but it's the performances that carry it – especially that of Grant, who transforms his trademark charm into something sinister.

Beck says eventually casting Grant was the end of an unexpected journey. "Every single scene is predicated on, is this a dangerous situation, or is this just a conversation that has a little bit of bite and edge?" he explains.

"It took the process of Bryan and I throwing a bunch of names around, and then thinking about 35 years of our relationship with Hugh Grant, somebody that we've seen in so many movies, where there is a charm and this wit.

"But then you look outside of his filmography, and you see this incredible conviction and intellect with the different things that he's fighting for, such as the phone hacking case in the UK. It snapped together that he is like Mr Reed."

When it came to his sparring partners, Woods says East and Thatcher won their roles because they found the truth of what a Mormon missionary sounds and acts like. "When we put them in a room together finally they did have an awkward chemistry, which is what we needed," he adds. "Because missionaries are thrust together."

The pair also praise their production designer Philip Messina (*The Hunger Games*), DP Chung Chung-hoon and costume designer Betsy Heimann for creating a claustrophobic, puzzle box environment. "The house had to mirror Reed as a character," Beck says. "The more the film goes on, the more the story unveils itself, the more the house unveils itself, the more Reed unveils himself."

Beck and Woods now hope this long-gestating idea lands with the masses. "The characters, at their best, all represent many different people that are on the spectrum of belief or non-belief," Beck says. "Bryan and I always say there are so many things that Reed says that are the quiet things that we've been thinking for so long. Yet that doesn't mean that's where we come out on the final word of an idea.

"Religion can be great. It can be really bad and harmful when people take it for granted and don't investigate. *Heretic* starts scratching at that, and what we were always interested in is this should be a conversation."

Heretic is in cinemas from 1 November.

Co-writer/director Scott Beck preaches his sermon.

Sophie Thatcher and Chloe East: Mormons.

Co-writer/director Bryan Woods also has thoughts.

SCI-FACT! **Beck and Wood cast Sophie Thatcher after being impressed by her role in Rob Savage's *The Boogeyman*, which they wrote.**

"You'll believe a man can fly..." and we did.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Cape Of Good Hope

Documentary **Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story** unpacks the inspirational actor-activist WORDS: **JAMES MOTTRAM**

"I WAS OBSESSED WITH Superman," admits director Peter Ettedgui. "I remember growing up and getting my dad to do me a badge of the Superman crest."

But it was when Christopher Reeve starred in 1978's *Superman* that he really got hooked. The story of Reeve doesn't simply begin and end with him playing the Man of Steel, of course. In 1995, he was left paralysed after a horse riding accident. "[It was] just that irony that the man who incarnated the hero with all the superpowers now couldn't move a muscle."

Yet Reeve's third act, so brilliantly chronicled in Ettedgui and co-director Ian Bonhôte's new documentary *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*, shows just how he was determined to campaign for those with similar disabilities.

"I remember all that so vividly, thinking, 'What a hero'," continues Ettedgui. And yet getting this film off the ground was not easy, with the directors behind fashion doc *McQueen* and Paralympics Games tale *Rising Phoenix* approaching 13 financiers, with no luck.

"They all turned it down," says Bonhôte. "He had died 20 years ago in 2004 and some people didn't think he was that relevant." Thankfully, persistence paid off, with the directors able to call on some remarkable home movie footage of Reeve, the support of his children Matthew, Alexandra and William, and some celebrity friends, including Susan Sarandon, Glenn Close and Jeff Daniels, to provide much-needed context. The result is a tearjerking reminder that Reeve really was one of the all-time greats, as evidenced when the film premiered in Sundance earlier this year.

Christopher Reeve and his family, shot in 1986.

"People loved the film... they were so responsive to Christopher," says Ettedgui. "[The question of] 'Is he a big enough star?' All that seemed to melt away, because there was such love for this man and what he had achieved, beyond the [Superman] cape. We were quite amazed by that."

Unsurprisingly, both directors believe Reeve to be the greatest of all movie Supermen. "I don't want to kind of preclude what James Gunn is doing with David Corenswet, but to date, without any doubt," says Ettedgui.

Adds Bonhôte: "The duality between Superman and Clark Kent is so endearing and so cute and so charming, and he played that so well... even if now some of the effects have not aged really well, you still feel stuff when you watch the films."

WARNER BROS/DC COMICS/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Reeve after the riding accident which paralysed him.

> **The strength of him coming out was a huge message for the disabled community**

Yet while *Super/Man* delves into the Superman legacy, and the four films Reeve filmed as the character, it's far more than a tribute to the Man of Steel. "At the end of the day, it's a film about disability rights, fighting for the right cause and family and legacy," says Bonhôte.

"So we have Superman in it, but it's not a film only for the Superman fans. We could have made a six-parter where five of them could have been about how extraordinary it was to actually create Superman and making him fly." In a film filled with emotive footage, surely the most eye-moistening must be when Reeve appears at the 1996 Oscars. "Now he's quadriplegic on a vent. So the most disabled you can actually be as a human being," says Bonhôte. "The strength of him coming out was a huge message for the disabled community, and for society in general. Our Superman is showing himself at his most vulnerable, not even a year after the accident. I think that sent a shock wave to people."

The film also touches on Reeve's deep friendship with fellow actor and comedian Robin Williams, very much seen in that Academy Awards footage. "I keep thinking of Robin in the audience at the Oscars when Chris is speaking and Robin... you can see the emotion on his face," says Ettedgui. "The other actors who are there are all like, 'Oh my god, this is extraordinary', and the pity and so on. With Robin, it's sort of like, 'This is my brother on the stage and I'm here rooting for him.'"

Twenty years after his death, what do the filmmakers think is Reeve's legacy? "I think the legacy is more that the person is almost more important than the actor," says Bonhôte. "There are loads of actors where you would want to make a documentary about them... the greatest thing about them is the acting. But with Chris, I think the person is greater than the actor."

Ettedgui reflects on a moment in *Superman* where Lois Lane says, "Who are you?" "He says, 'A friend.' And that, to me, is Christopher. He was ultimately a friend to humanity, a friend to the disabled, a friend to his kids. He used to have this Abraham Lincoln quote on his desk: 'If I do good, I feel good. If I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion.' And that is Christopher."

Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story is in cinemas from 1 November.

Reeve's son Will (centre) with the directors.

SCI-FACT! **Superman could have been played by Robert Redford, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Neil Diamond (!).**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Sam Raimi reportedly in the frame to direct a third **Doctor Strange** movie.
- Katy O'Brian is the female lead in Edgar Wright's remake of **The Running Man**.
- Freddie Prinze Jr reprising the role of Ray Bronson in the new **I Know What You Did Last Summer**.
- *Resident Alien*'s Alan Tudyk joining the cast of **Superman**.
- Ryan Coogler's Michael B Jordan-starring vampire film officially titled **Sinners**.
- Matthias Schoenaerts to play the villainous Krem in **Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow**.
- DC developing **Dynamic Duo**, an animated feature teaming Dick Grayson and Jason Todd.
- The seventh **Scream** targets a 27 February 2026 release.
- Ben Hardy and Mia Tomlinson joining **The Conjuring: Last Rites**.
- Rachel McAdams in talks for new Sam Raimi-helmed horror **Send Help**.
- DC rumoured to be developing a big-screen team-up for Bane and Deathstroke.
- Daniel Quinn-Toye to star in live-action **Voltron** movie.

VIVIEN KILLILEA/GETTY

The Legendary Lynx comes to life in her own comic.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Lynxed In

Alex Segura's **The Legendary Lynx** moves from books to comics in Mad Cave's new graphic novel

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CENTRING ON crimes in the comic book industry, Alex Segura's novels *Secret Identity* and the upcoming *Alter Ego* also feature excerpts from so-called lost comic series *The Legendary Lynx*. Purporting to be the work of fictional creators Carmen Valdez, Doug Detmer and Annie Bustamante, they are actually the handiwork of Segura and artist Sandy Jarrell, and have now been collected and enhanced in a new graphic novel from Mad Cave Studios.

"Pretty early on, I knew Sandy and I were going to expand on the comic book sequences in *Secret Identity*," Segura tells Red Alert. "The pages in the novel were vignettes – a brief scene, a splash page, a final page – but they hinted at a greater story, one that played a pivotal part in the novel itself. Once we knew we were going to make actual issues out of the small batches of pages – or 'remastering and recolouring a lost classic', as I like to say – Mad Cave became the obvious choice."

In addition to scripting series such as Marvel's *Spider-Society* and *The Question* for DC, Segura also co-writes Mad Cave's recent *Dick Tracy* revival. "Mad Cave got what we're trying to do with the Lynx and most importantly they played along with the meta aspect as well," he continues. "The graphic novel collects the first four issues of *The Legendary Lynx*, originally published in 1975 by Triumph Comics but long since out of print. That's the meta line, but in reality they're the comics from *Secret Identity* plus one sequence from *Alter Ego*, expanded with about 60 to 65 all-new pages by me and Sandy."

Segura really leans into the Lynx's metafictional qualities, alluding to his and Rob Hart's just-released sci-fi novel *Deep Space* in *Alter Ego*, and including his private eye character Pete Fernandez in its supporting cast. He also claims that some of his own creator-owned characters are actually part of Triumph's superhero stable. "I love the meta stuff," he laughs. "There was a point, early on in writing *Secret Identity*, where I realised I would have to create an entire universe worth of heroes to reflect the Triumph line of comics.

"But then I thought, 'Well, why do that when I have a ton of characters myself I can use, such as the Black Ghost, the Dusk, the Freedom Alliance and more?' It made it all feel more fun and organic, like all my creations lived in the same universe, and that also applies to having Pete Fernandez in *Alter Ego*."

Describing him as "the most underrated artist in comics", Segura praises Jarrell's artistic adaptability as he moves from *Secret Identity*'s historical milieu to *Alter Ego*'s more contemporary setting. "Sandy has poured himself into this book", he says.

"He found a way to not only evoke the '70s in *Secret Identity* but then change his style enough to become a completely different, modern artist in *Alter Ego*. Seeing his work paired with colourist Grey Allison's stylish and retro-themed colours in the graphic novel has been a revelation."

The Legendary Lynx is out on 12 November, Alter Ego is published on 3 December.

SCI-FACT! **Segura is also writing Dynamite Entertainment's upcoming Green Hornet/Miss Fury miniseries for artist Federico Sorressa.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Star Troopers

Tom Hardy moves from films to comics with **Arcbound**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE HE HAS APPARENTLY donned Venom's symbiote suit for the final time, Tom Hardy is now making his comic book debut, teaming up with co-writers Frank Tieri and Scott Snyder on *Arcbound*, the first salvo from Dark Horse's new imprint of the same name. Stemming from ideas for a potential videogame, the 12-parter is illustrated by Ryan Smallman, who reveals that Hardy's contribution is character-driven.

"Tom takes the context of the characters and digs into their emotions, deepening the existential side of the story," says Smallman. "When I started with the artwork, all that story and character motivation made my job much more intentional.

"My role extends to creative direction as well and designing every aspect of the Arcbound universe, so I was able to bring my ideas and sensibilities to complement what Scott, Frank and Tom were doing."

Set in a future where malevolent organisation Zynitec is now plundering other worlds' natural resources after decimating Earth, the series takes place on the planet of Rynar, where their troops are battling the local colonists. "Some of my favourite sci-fi digs into themes of injustice that comes through a quest for power, and we were all interested in tackling that in a way that felt relevant to instances we see today," says Snyder.

He compares Kai's journey to Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film *Starship Troopers*: "That moment of realisation that everything you've been doing has been for an unjust cause is so powerful."

"There's actually multiple colonies throughout the Zynitec Empire that are affected and Rinar is just one of them," continues Tieri. "The thing is, what saved humanity was Zynitec's discovery of Kronium. Everything in the empire runs on it – their ships, their planet, every aspect of their society.

"However, what they eventually learned was that the mining process caused the colonists to get incredibly sick and ultimately die, which brings about the necessity of transferring those workers' consciousnesses into Arcbound bodies.

"While people being in 'Arcs' makes them invulnerable, they're essentially robots. They can't feel any more, there's a loss of freedom and they're no longer 'human', so you can see why some colonists have a problem with that. Hence the rebellion, which our lead character Kai finds himself in the middle of."

Kai questions his role as a leading Mediator in Zynitec's army after receiving a message from a mysterious entity. "Fans will learn the true nature of the world as Kai does, as he learns the truth about Zynitec, and about who he can and can't trust, and about all the twists and turns heading his way," adds Tieri.

"Maybe the biggest mystery Kai uncovers is just who and what the enigmatic Evers are. When we first hear about them, they're the big, bad enemy that Zynitec is protecting everyone from, which is why Zynitec need so much Kronium to run their defence systems. Like most other things in this series, the truth is much more complex than we initially think."

Arcbound issue one is out on 13 November.

Cover art for issue one, by Ryan Smallman.

Alternative issue one cover art, by Ryan Ottley.

Alternative issue one cover art, by Rose Besch.

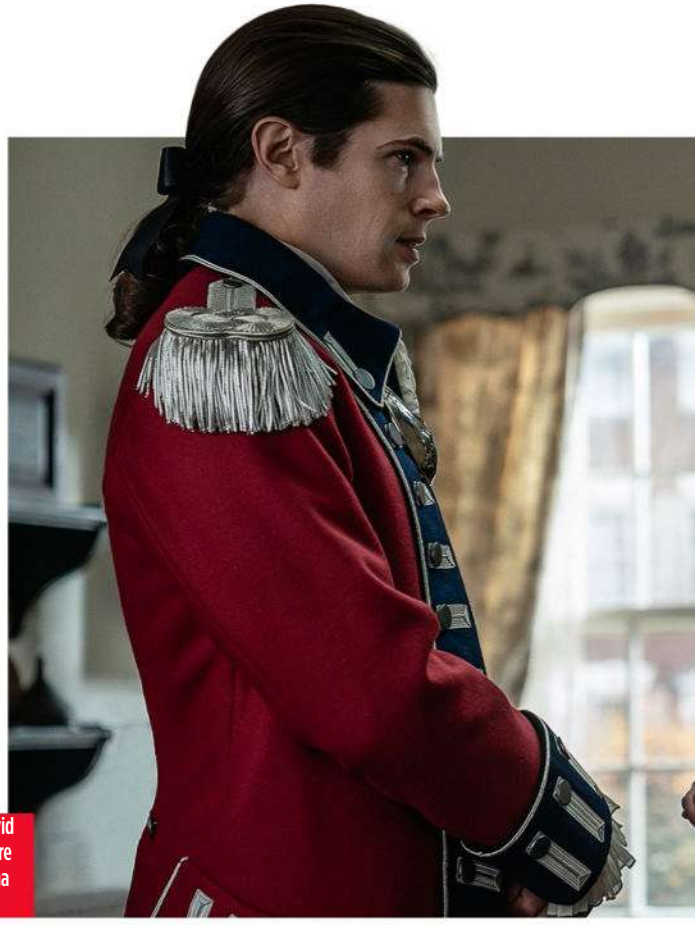
SCI-FACT! **Tom Hardy previously explored 19th century colonialism in TV show *Taboo*, which he starred in and co-created with his father.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Stoned Love

Producer Matthew B Roberts explains how **Outlander**'s penultimate season sets up the show's finale

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**



John Grey (David Berry) and Claire Fraser (Caitríona Balfe).

Jamie Fraser (Sam Heughan) and Old Ian (Steven Cree).

A LITTLE OVER A decade ago, when executive producer Ronald D Moore (*Battlestar Galactica*) was given permission by author Diana Gabaldon to adapt her beloved historical/sci-fi *Outlander* books into a streaming series, there was no cause to worry about endings.

At the time, much like George RR Martin with his fantasy series *A Song Of Ice And Fire*, Gabaldon had written seven novels and many short stories detailing the epic life of Second World War nurse Claire Randall, who touches a standing stone and is sent to 1743 Scotland, where she meets Highlander Jamie Fraser. There was more than enough story!

The television series, starring Caitríona Balfe as Claire and Sam Heughan as Jamie, has also become a global hit. And with the release of "Part II" of season seven this month, and Starz's commission for an eighth and final season, the show catches up to Gabaldon's ninth of 10 intended *Outlander* novels.

As a showrunner since season five, Matthew B Roberts tells Red Alert he's experiencing his own kind of time displacement. He's just wrapped production on season eight, which will end the series – likely before Gabaldon finishes work on her last book. In planning out season seven, Roberts explains that they hadn't received the order for season eight yet, so they thought seven might be it.

"We started to compile and pull from all the material, not just book eight and book nine," he says of their ambition to get in as much as possible. We started to think, 'What haven't we done and how do we finish this epic series?'

"Then the news came down that we were getting an eighth season. So then you have to backtrack, and figure out how to spread this out. How far can we go? Where do we go? And that took some recalibration."

These eight new episodes will take Jamie, Claire and their nephew Young Ian (John Bell) back to Scotland to reunite with Jamie's kin at their family seat, Lallybroch. Audiences can expect a lot of familiar faces from the past, including time traveller Geillis Duncan (Lotte Verbeek) and Dougal MacKenzie (Graham McTavish). In parallel, there's a time travel mystery to solve as Jamie and Claire's son-in-law Roger (Richard Rankin) uses the stones to go back in time to find his kidnapped young son.

"Lallybroch!" "Bless you." "No, it's the – oh, YOU."

"There's a lot going on," Roberts says. "It's how the American Revolution impacts them. It's how travelling to Scotland impacts them. Back when Jamie was saying goodbye to Jenny, his sister, he promised to bring Ian home. It was always our hope that we'd have enough space to get to that. And as Fraser family reunions go, there's some good and some turmoil."

> **"There's some closure, and then there's a lot of questions"**

As for Roger's quest through time, Roberts says, "Anytime we can work the time travel stories in, we do, because that's what this show is about. We have multiple epic love stories that span these eras. And oddly enough, when we present this to production, they get super-excited about this because there's new costumes, there's new sets, there's new locations."

He continues, "The story unfolds so the audience is there,

Roger Wakefield (Richard Rankin).

The fuzz visit Brianna (Sophie Skelton).

Claire and Jamie have a drop of the hard stuff.

experiencing everything at the same time Roger will. Obviously, the book fans are ahead, but those fans in the audience that don't know what's coming, you're with Roger, picking up the clues and trying to figure out why he's back in time."

There will also be a huge twist in the dynamic for Jamie, Claire and their life-long ally Lord John Grey (David Berry), one readers will know from Gabaldon's text. "What Diana does in the books, and what we try to do on the show, is we separate Jamie and Claire as much as possible, because it's the getting back together that brings the epic-ness to the story," Roberts says. "In the book, it happens in a different way, how they get separated. But then [their reunion] is so different from any other reunion we've ever had, and that's what makes it so exciting."

As the co-writer of this season's season finale, Roberts says, "There's some closure, and then there's a lot of questions that the audience will be asking for season eight. Where does it go from here? Where is it going to end?"

And there is an end, Roberts confirms, because he wrote the series finale independently from Gabaldon's in-progress novel. "We don't know how she's going to end the book series," he admits. "But I've had [my idea] in my head for a very long time." Expect to see his version sometime in late 2025 or early 2026.

Outlander is on Starz in the US from 22 November. UK details are TBC.

SCI-FACT! **Diana Gabaldon wrote episode 14 in season seven, and one more episode in season eight.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Kyle Chandler is Green Lantern Hal Jordan in HBO's DC series **Lanterns**.
- James Wan set to be executive producer on **RoboCop** TV series.
- Oh fu – er, fudge: **Chucky** cancelled after three seasons.
- Joe Manganiello and Lera Abova joining **One Piece** as Mr 0 and Miss All Sunday.
- Krysten Ritter's **Orphan Black: Echoes** axed after one season.
- Melanie Scrofano to star in Syfy's adaptation of Image Comics's **Revival**.
- *Snowpiercer*'s Daveed Diggs joining the fifth season of **The Boys**.
- *Nurse Jackie*'s Heidi Schreck to write the live-action **She-Ra** series.
- Tamara Smart is Thalia Grace in season two of **Percy Jackson And The Olympians**.
- Apple TV+ cancelling **Time Bandits** after season one.
- Elizabeth Henstridge rumoured to play Lex Luthor's daughter in the final season of **Superman & Lois**.
- Evan Peters, Ashton Kutcher and Anthony Ramos to star in Ryan Murphy's Image Comics adaptation **The Beauty**.

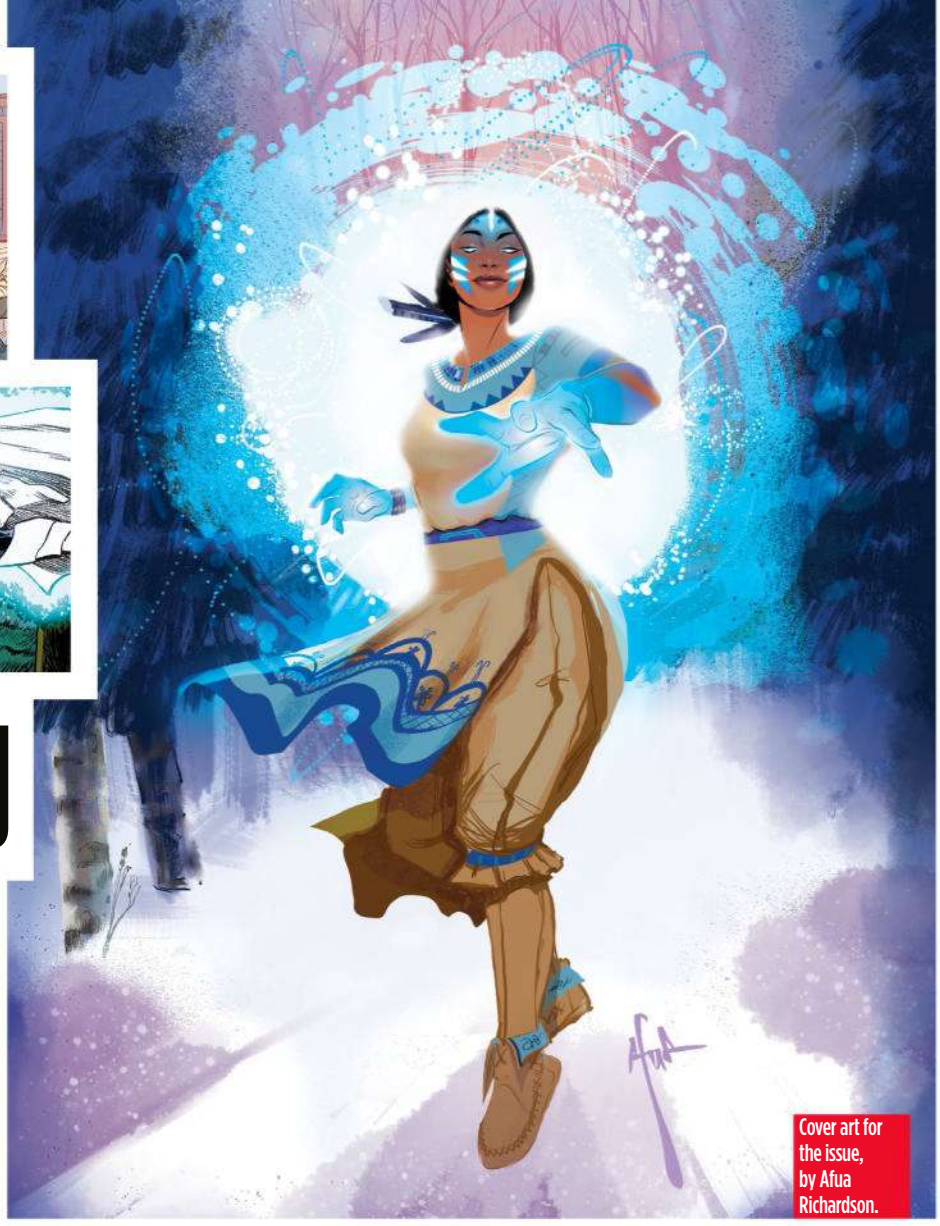
WEISS EUBANKS/NBCUNIVERSAL VIA GETTY

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Crossing Over

What If...?'s **Kahhori** meets Daredevil, Echo and Moon Knight as she moves from TV to comics

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



Cover art for the issue, by Afua Richardson.

WHEN HE FIRST SAW "WHAT IF...? Kahhori Reshaped The World" from the Disney+ show's second season, Arihhonni "Honni" David was overjoyed that there was now a Marvel character who belonged to the Haudenosaunee People – and in particular the Kanien'kehá:ka, the People of the Flint, commonly known as the Mohawk.

Teaming up with artists David Cutler and Jim Terry respectively, he and fellow indigenous author Kelly Lynne D'Angelo have now both contributed to *Kahhori: Reshaper Of Worlds*, a new one-shot that sees her crossing over to the Marvel comic book universe.

"When Kahhori was first introduced I went to my parents' place to show my little brother," recalls David. "I wanted him to know there was now a Mohawk superhero and not only that, she was also from the same clan as us!"

"The absolute magic to see someone from the Haudenosaunee Nation getting representation in *What If...?* was unreal," continues D'Angelo. "Everything about her character – from her design to her powers and her backstory and the way she fights and speaks – was irrevocably Haudenosaunee."

David and D'Angelo's stories will be bookended by a framing sequence written by Kahhori co-creator Ryan Little and illustrated by Todd Harris. "My goal was the same as for the initial Kahhori episode: tell the most magic epic story possible, which is a race against time with Kahhori hunting a deadly new villain who grows more and more powerful with each passing moment," says Little.

He confirms that this is the same Kahhori we have seen on screen. "This adventure finds Kahhori back on Sky World after her adventures with Captain Carter and Strange Supreme in the *What If...?* season two finale. This story further explores her powers, Sky World lore and a dangerous secret we haven't yet seen in her TV appearance."

While David's story involves Kahhori crossing paths with Echo and Daredevil, D'Angelo's also features Moon Knight. "One of the things I wanted to do was to give her some edge," says D'Angelo. "She's always been a staunch protector and fighter, just like all the women in our nation. I wanted to give her something that felt dynamic, and the way I felt I could achieve that was by having her interact with other characters in a way that felt fresh and mysterious. She holds so much knowledge and power within her, and I wanted that depth to provoke curiosity on the page in the reader's mind."

"I wanted to take Kahhori into a contemporary space of indigeneity, so we incorporated the modern aesthetics you'd see at a Powwow, a social or community get-together," adds David. "There's a delicious meal and a few tributes to modern movements like Missing And Murdered Women and Every Child Matters.

"I also pay homage to a little-known bit of history: the Mohawk ironworkers who helped build New York City and other monuments across the US and Canada. My section focuses on Kahhori hitting the ground running in the 616 as she wastes no time before sprinting into the Marvel comic universe!" ●

Kahhori: Reshaper Of Worlds is out on 6 November.

SCI-FACT! **According to Honni David, Cutler was equally good at making food look "Gordon Ramsay-tier delicious" as drawing action scenes.**

SCI-FACT! **Ryan North also wrote the just-released *Lower Decks* interactive graphic novel *Warp Your Own Way*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Going Underground

The TV series may be ending, but **Lower Decks** continues in a new ongoing comic series WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE *LOWER DECKS* HAS RECENTLY RETURNED TO our screens for the fifth and (maybe) final series, the crew of the USS Cerritos are also making their comic book comeback, this time in IDW's continuing monthly series (after 2022's three-parter and last year's *Shaxs' Best Day* one-shot).

"The advantage of the ongoing is that like the TV show you can have plotlines developing in the background across each of these individual adventures," says writer Ryan North, who believes that *Lower Decks*' animated format and humour make it particularly suitable for comics.

"It has the potential to be realised anywhere, but comics especially is a great medium and a super-fun one," continues North. "One of the biggest differences is in terms of story length with stories running across two issues, so I can dig into things that there might not be room for on a half-hour show. You can go a little deeper and explore these crazy big weird ideas in a way that isn't possible elsewhere."

With Derek Charm illustrating the first two issues, the new series is adopting an episodic approach, allowing North to focus on the characters. "We get to trek along with them as they go from younger and more naïve recruits, developing and becoming better officers and better people," he says. "I perhaps feel the closest affinity to Mariner, but in real life I perhaps would be Boimler or possibly Rutherford or Tendi. T'Lyn was less of an established character when I first started on the miniseries, so she didn't have much of a role to play. But now she does, and she's great, so getting to write her feels like a special treat."

The main cover art for issue one, by Derek Charm.

MARKED DECKS

Because North needs "to know where these stories fit into the emotional arcs of the characters throughout every season of the show", each storyline takes place at a specific stardate. "You'll see stuff develop and people change, but it all fits within what the show is doing," adds the writer, who liaises constantly with showrunner Mike McMahan.

"We've worked very closely to ensure that everything clicks and I've also insisted on getting access to the animatics of all the unreleased episodes, although it's impossible to say whether that's because my commitment to quality is such that I couldn't write the comics otherwise or it's just because I love *Star Trek* so much!"

Though North says "I don't want to spoil things too badly", he does reveal that we can expect to see some familiar faces. "The first adventure harkens back to a ship not seen in real life for decades, and hundreds of years in story-time, so there's some deep cuts there as it goes to a place you won't be expecting," he teases. "The next story is completely different and is something we could only really do with *Lower Decks*. Both of them are *Star Trek* stories through and through, but in different ways."

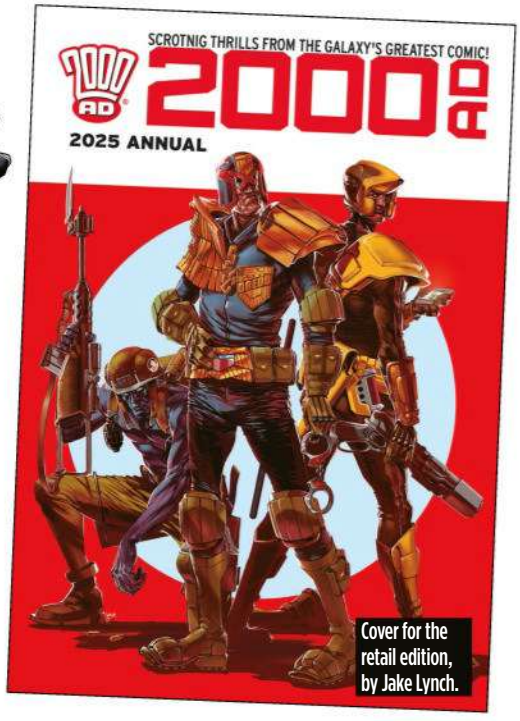
Star Trek: Lower Decks issue one is out on 13 November.

SCI-FACT! **Dan Dare graced Gerry Wood's cover for the first *2000 AD* annual, which was published in late 1977 and dated 1978.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Galaxy's Greatest Annuals

The **2000 AD** and **Treasury Of British Comics** annuals are both returning for 2025 WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



Cover for the retail edition, by Jake Lynch.

AS COMIC BOOK CREATOR Paul Grist says, "getting an annual was an end of year treat and a proper companion to the weekly comic." Now Rebellion are set to release the first *2000 AD* Annual in 24 years – along with the second *Treasury Of British Comics Annual*.

"The 2025 *2000 AD* annual will hopefully look and feel just like the annuals that readers remember," says editor Jonathan Stevenson. "I even got out my tape measure to make sure that it's the same size as its predecessors!"

Both volumes alternate new strips with classic reprints. The *2000 AD Annual 2025* includes includes a Strontium Dog strip by Si Spurrier and Hayden Sherman, and a Rogue Trooper tale by Alex Paknadel and Jake Lynch. "In our story, our cavilling quartet take an ill-advised shortcut through a forest saturated with psychotogens," says Paknadel. "Rogue's immunity to toxins isn't absolute, so things get a bit *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*-y as he starts hallucinating like crazy. Thing is, not counting Gunnar, Helm and Bagman, he might be alone out there..."

"It was an opportunity to write about America today through the skewed lens that is Judge Dredd's annihilated America," adds US writer Chris Condon who, with artist Fernando Blanco, is pitting Mega-City's finest against a Chimpsurrection. "Our story is a satirical treatise on poisonous misinformation and outright lies, specifically focusing on how those lies are rotting America from within. That said, it's also about chimpanzees that can talk!"

After including Robot Archie in last year's *Smash!* miniseries, Paul Grist (working with artist Simon Williams) has enjoyed sending him on a solo outing for the *Treasury Of British Comics Annual 2025*. "*Smash!* was great fun but Archie spent most of the time being controlled by the computer Max from 'The Thirteenth Floor', so this story was my opportunity to write a proper Robot Archie story," says Grist.

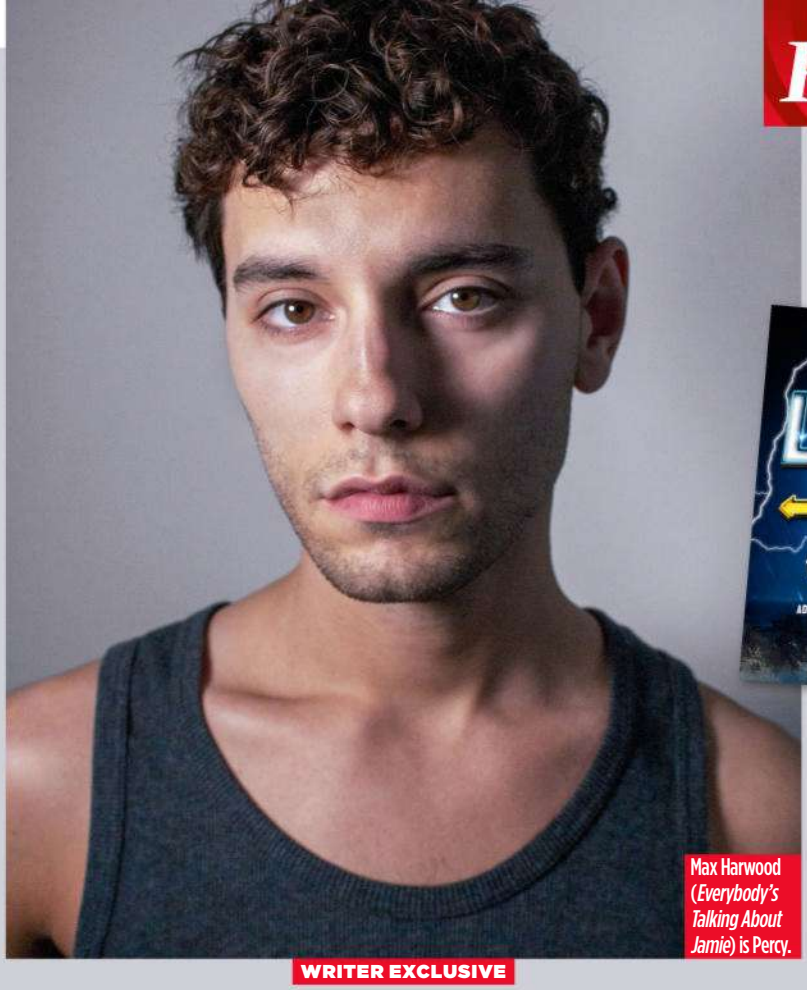
"He gets to fight an old foe, the metal-eating Sludge, as well as some robot dinosaurs – and also stars in a programme that has absolutely nothing to do with *Match Of The Day*."

Meanwhile, Simon Furman, who says annuals "were a big part of my childhood", is teaming up on 'Kelly's Eye' with artist Mike Collins. "It has vivid memories for me as I was an avid reader of Tim Kelly's misadventures in *Valiant*," he says. "So it was a joy to be able to do a new 'Kelly's Eye' story in the classic vein but with a bit of a modern twist, especially as it brings back one of Tim's premier adversaries and mixes in one of my other favourite *Lion* strips, 'Watch Out For The White-Eyes'."

"An annual always felt like a narrative chocolate box that you can dip in and out of over the Christmas break and let those stories settle into fond memories thereafter," adds Alec Worley, who scripts 'Black Beth' for artist Anna Morozova. "It's a swashbuckling desert adventure that finds vengeful sword-maiden Black Beth and her blind sidekick Quido fleeing a bunch of slavers, only to face an altogether more dangerous foe."

Treasury Of British Comics Annual 2025 is out on 8 November. The 2000 AD Annual 2025 is out on 27 November.

Cover for the webshop exclusive edition.



Max Harwood (*Everybody's Talking About Jamie*) is Percy.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Curtain Up

A lavish stage musical of the first **Percy Jackson** book is coming to London's West End

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

IF YOU'VE BEEN suffering Percy Jackson withdrawal symptoms since the TV adaptation of *The Lightning Thief* aired in December 2023, rest assured you'll be able to get your fix of all things Olympian when a musical version of Rick Riordan's book hits the West End this November.

Adapted by Joe Tracz, who also worked on the Disney+ TV series, *The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical* originally premiered off-Broadway in 2014, but it's only now – 10 years on – that it's made its way to London, and Tracz couldn't be prouder.

"It's very exciting," he tells Red Alert. "We have a new director in Lizzi Gee who just had all these fresh ideas about how to stage it. Rob and I, we've pretty much only ever had one director before, so for us part of the fun of this London production is getting to see a totally different vision of the show."

Tracz is keen for fans to know that, even if they know the book and indeed the TV series inside out, this stage musical of *The Lightning Thief* offers something new. "In theatre you're never going to have the budget that a film or TV show has, where you're creating monsters through VFX and you're able to film in real locations," he says.

"So we knew we just had to embrace the theatricality of it. So when Percy uses his water powers, he does that by firing a leaf blower and you have toilet paper representing water. You would never do that in a film or TV show, but in theatre, it feels punk rock!"

He adds that the tone of this adaptation is different, with a degree of self-referentiality that certainly isn't there in the TV show. "You can be a little cheeky and self-aware on stage," he points out, "because you're ultimately telling the audience, 'We're all on this adventure together, we're all making believe in this as we go.'"

For a committed theatre-head like Tracz (he's also adapted Joe Iconis's YA novel *Be More Chill* for the stage), getting younger people to see a live show is a particular thrill. "What's been cool is seeing audiences of all different ages," he says. "So you've got people in their twenties and thirties who grew up with the books, and we've been seeing parents and grandparents coming with their kids, maybe for the first time themselves, so they're having this amazing intro to what theatre can be."

Tracz says that at the moment there's no plan to adapt second book *The Sea Of Monsters*. He's also absent from the dramatising of that novel for the TV screen, having recently jumped ship to work on another beloved title, Netflix's *One Piece*, showrunning season two with Matt Owens.

"It feels like a kindred spirit to *Percy* in so many ways," he says of his new job on the live-action version of Eiichiro Oda's manga series. "It's another show about young people, leading with power and positivity to try to find a way to make a difference in the world and about standing up to corrupt authority."

The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical opens at The Other Palace on 23 November.

The
LIGHTNING
THIEF
THE PERCY JACKSON MUSICAL
BOOK BY JOE TRACZ. MUSIC & LYRICS BY ROB ROCICKI
ADAPTED FROM THE BOOK THE LIGHTNING THIEF BY RICK RIORDAN
THE TIDE IS TURNING
FROM SAT 23 NOV | THE OTHER PALACE

Stills from the musical's trailer.

© BILL KENWRIGHT LIMITED.

SCI-FACT! **Aside from his work on the *Percy Jackson* TV show, Joe Tracz has also written for Netflix's *Lemony Snicket* adaptation.**

VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

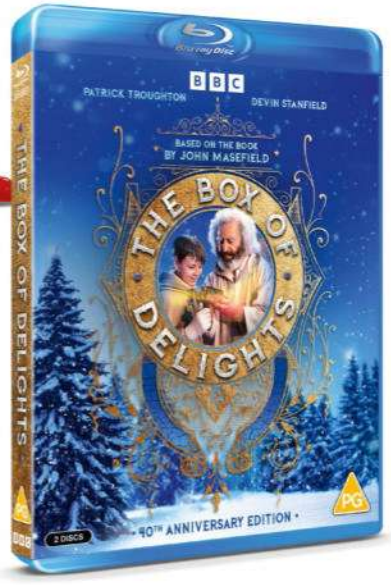
Get used to seeing *Wicked* – it's adorning everything from pyjamas to macaroni cheese in the run-up to Christmas. Obviously our favourite tie-in merch has to be the doll range from Mattel, going from standard versions of Glinda and Elphaba all the way up to deluxe singing editions.

MAKE IT SO!

Universal Studios Hollywood has announced Universal Fan Fest Nights, running from 25 April to 18 May. From the creators of Halloween Horror Nights, this interactive, immersive and after-hours event will focus on franchises such as *Star Trek*, *Back To The Future*, *One Piece* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Part of the fan experience will be seeing the Enterprise bridge set from *Picard*.

SLAY YOUR ENEMIES

Secret Wars is back – and we're finally getting figures of the Beyonder and Titania (who now comes complete with a modesty Battleworld breastplate) courtesy of Hasbro Pulse's Marvel Legends series. Here's hoping they do the entire line-up! Also available – a Vulture/Spider-Man two-pack.



OPEN THE BOX

Just in time for the 40th anniversary – who can believe it? – *The Box Of Delights* is getting a special two-disc Blu-ray release on 25 November including a feature-length documentary featuring 25 members of cast and crew. Read more in our next issue!

EARL GREY, HOT

Master Replicas has teamed up with Bodum to create a limited run of *Star Trek* tea cups, as seen in *The Next Generation*. Unavailable for years, this new run is sold in sets of four at £49.99 from masterreplicas.com.

SFX SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

- Further cast for spin-off series *The War Between The Land And The Sea* have been announced. Patrick Baladi, Francesca Corney, Vincent Franklin, Adrian Lukis and Mei Mac join the ensemble.

- New action figures of the Fifteenth Doctor and Ruby Sunday were made available on the Character Options site in October. The special Vortex Edition releases are online exclusives, with retail versions expected to follow.

- Ncuti Gatwa appears on the new Jade Thirlwall song "Midnight Cowboy", released on 25 September.

- Big Finish has new releases. The *Torchwood* monthly range continues with "Bad Connection", starring Indira Varma, in November, "Reflect", featuring the return of Sophie Aldred as Ace, in December, and "Ianto's Inferno" in January.

- *The Seventh Doctor Adventures: The Doctor And Carnacki* is a set of three stories released in November, with three-part story "The War Doctor Rises: Unknown Soldiers", starring Jonathon Carley, available in December.

- Jo Martin returns in three brand new stories in January, alongside Alice Krige (*Star Trek*'s Borg Queen) in *The Fugitive Doctor: Most Wanted*. Also due in January is *The Audio Novels: The Lord of Misrule*, a Fourth Doctor story narrated by Jon Culshaw.

- *The Third Doctor Adventures: Doctor Who And The Brain Drain*, starring Tim Treloar, Daisy Ashford and Jon Culshaw, is released in February.

- March brings *The Lost Stories: Genesis Of The Cybermen*, featuring the Fifth Doctor, Tegan, Nyssa and Adric, alongside two new stories for the Fourth Doctor and Leela in "The Hellwood Inheritance".

- A brand new horror series starring Reece Shearsmith, *Planet Krynoid: Nightfall*, releases in April, while the season 19 team return in *The Fifth Doctor Adventures: Hooklight*, a 12-part adventure releasing in April and May.

SCI-FACT! **Dolls of other *Wicked* characters – like Fiyero and Madam Morrible – are available as US retail stores exclusives only.**

SCI-FACT! **Graham was also an uncredited voice on Gerry Anderson's *Space Precinct* in 1995.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

DAVID GRAHAM 1925-2024

The voice of Parker, the Daleks and more

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

WHETHER VOICING an alien blob of spite in armoured casing, or giving a gruff "Yus, m'lady!" at the wheel of a pink Rolls, David Graham was a frequently unseen but unforgettable presence in British telefantasy.

Originally from Hackney, London, he was "born with the acting gene raging inside", along with what he gratefully called "a good ear", which served him well over a six-decade career as a voice artist. Following RAF duty in the Second World War, Graham trained at New York's Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre before building a stage and TV career in Britain.

Gerry Anderson's burgeoning puppet empire provided steady employment during the 1960s. After voicing Gramps in *Four Feather Falls*, Graham went on to play Dr Horatio Beaker and Mitch the Monkey in *Supercar*, Professor Mat Matic, Lieutenant Ninety and Zoonie the Lazoon in *Fireball XL5*, assorted villains in *Stingray* and Brains, Gordon Tracy and Kyrano in *Thunderbirds*.

David Graham (and Parker), in 2018.

The adventures of International Rescue would also gift him his most indelible character: "Nosey" Parker, reformed cockney safe-cracker turned butler and chauffeur to Lady Penelope.

The voice was inspired by a wine waiter at a pub in Cookham: "It interested me the way he kept dropping his aitches and putting them somewhere else," Graham recalled. Along with fellow actor Peter Hawkins he created the voice of the Daleks and soon found himself imitated in every playground. "We came at it from the approach that it had to be stylised and menacing," he remembered.

Graham went on to voice the malignant pepperpots on the big screen – and appeared in-vision on *Doctor Who* in "The Gunfighters" and "City Of Death".

Enjoying a late career success as Grandpa Pig in *Peppa Pig*, he also resurrected Parker for 2015's *Thunderbirds Are Go*. "I didn't have to practise... it's in my vocal DNA," he said. "I can turn it on."

GEOFF PUGH/SHUTTERSTOCK

ROBERT WATTS 1938-2024

Producer of the '80s *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* films plus *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

KENNETH COPE 1931-2024

British actor who played the spectral Marty Hopkirk in *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased)*.

NEW AUTHOR

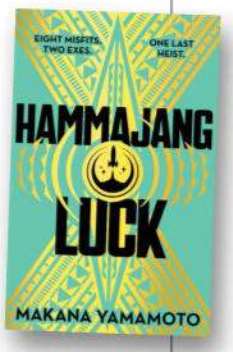
MAKANA YAMAMOTO

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND "CYBERPUNK LESBIAN SPACE HEIST" *HAMMAJANG LUCK*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Edie Morikawa is the heist's runner – thieves that traverse the catacombs of the space station. The story opens with them finishing a prison stint after their ex-partner in crime betrayed them eight years ago. Now they're starting over, but their ex-bestie has one last job for them...

Who or what is a Hammajang?
→ It's a Hawaiian Pidgin word meaning messed up. It's from the Hawaiian word "hemahema", meaning awkward or unskilled, and the Pidgin word "junk", meaning broken or bad.

Did anything in particular spark the idea?
→ A tweet, believe it or not! Something along the lines of "Childhood friends-to enemies-to-lovers hits different." Which in my imagination met the idea of two backstabbing thieves begrudgingly reunited for one last job.



How long did it take to write?
→ From first draft to polished manuscript, about nine months. It evolved a lot along the way! Mostly by pulling out the nuances of Edie's relationship with their best friend and the crew, incorporating more elements of lesbian history/culture, and adding in more sci-fi elements like cyborgs.

Did you do much research?
→ My writing is grounded in real science, because often the truth is weirder than anything I could make up. My favourite thing I learned is that the ISS discharges electricity that builds up on the hull from travelling through Earth's ionosphere, so as not to zap the astronauts!

Hammajang Luck is out on 12 December, published by Gollancz.

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WICKED
JON M CHU AND HIS TEAM HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR GOOD
PLUS! BEING HUMAN / HERETIC / 2000 AD / SUPERMAN / ARCBOUND / DOCTOR WHO / WHAT IF...? / PERCY JACKSON / OUTLANDER / THE LEGENDARY LYNX / MONK & MINDY!
GOOD OMENS
A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
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WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE WITCHES, THE WICKED OLD WITCHES OF OZ. BUT BEFORE WE'RE WHISKED BACK TO THAT MAGICAL LAND, WE SPEAK WITH DIRECTOR JON M CHU AND HIS CREATIVE TEAM ABOUT ALL THINGS WICKED

WORDS: **HENRY CALVERT**

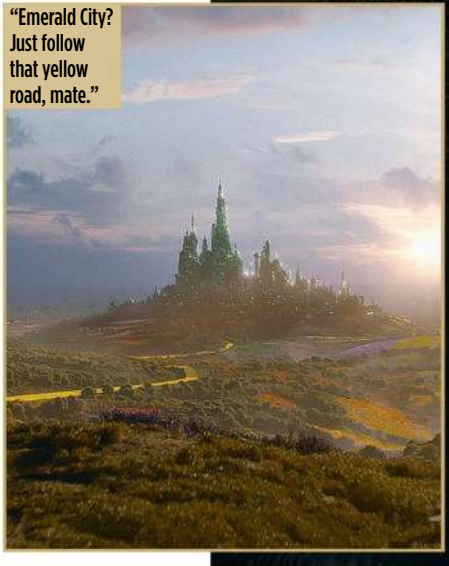
DEFYING

ALL ODDZ

"I'M NOT EVEN ALLOWED TO OPEN IT..." SAYS JON M CHU as he brandishes one of the most sought after, iconic and highly valuable books of all time in his hands. The book in question? One of only 10,000 original first printings of L Frank Baum's fabled *The Wonderful Wizard Of Oz*. The book that gave us wicked witches, cowardly lions and ruby slippers, a book that's captured the imagination of the young and the young at heart.

But as much as *SFX* covets the precious item, we're sitting with the director to discuss his own chapter in the ever-expanding legacy of Oz. Because this very book, since its release in 1900, has inspired not only one of the most beloved films of all time, a Muppet movie and a musical retelling starring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross, it's also given us one of the most successful stage musicals ever and the basis of Chu's upcoming film: *Wicked*.

Written by Winnie Holzman, with music by Stephen Schwartz, its backstory of the witches of Oz has been leaving audiences spellbound since 2003. Ornate costumes, a dazzling set and Grammy award-winning music all lent themselves to telling the tale of Elphaba and Glinda, two young girls who, from their time at university, learn to overcome their differences, become the best of friends and venture to Oz to meet the Wizard.



"Emerald City? Just follow that yellow road, mate."

WIZOMANIAC

To say more plot-wise would be a hideoteous spoiler, but it's fair to say that expanding on Ozian lore and giving the Wicked Witch of the West a sympathetic backstory was instantly appealing. *Wicked* has become a worldwide phenomenon: it's been performed in 16 countries, won three Tonys and a Grammy, and made actors like Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth household names.

Oh, and it's also turned over $5 billion in global sales, making it Universal's most profitable project ever. Whether it be listening to the soundtrack or venturing to the West End to see it live, for everyone who has experienced *Wicked*, it tends to be a thrillifying moment.

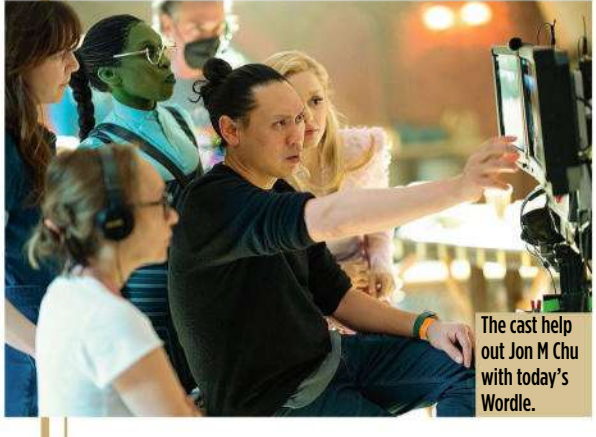
"I went to go see the show before it was on Broadway, when it was in San Francisco," smiles Chu, the precious first edition now safely out of *SFX*'s reach. "It was being workshopped where I grew up in the Bay Area. My mom called me and said, 'Come back for the weekend, Stephen Schwartz has a new musical that's playing at the Curran Theatre. You should come see it.'

"I was instantly blown away. It was one of those musicals that you're just like, this is already a movie. I'd never seen anything with that scale and scope on a stage before. Never in a million years did I think I'd be able to make that movie, yet 20 years later I got the call and here we are," he beams.

"The best thing about watching it so early was I crystallised in my brain where I was surprised, where I was moved and where I was super-excited. So I could protect those moments, those bubbles, in adapting the movie. I knew these were the things that were tried and true through all this time, and that gave me a little bit of guidance."

No stranger to adapting existing projects, Chu's work on the award-winning *Crazy Rich Asians* and another stage-to-screen adaptation, *In The Heights*, has given him a thorough understanding of how to remain loyal to existing material and fanbases while still making a project his own. "I have to not overthink it," he says. "Everything I've worked on has had existing fanbases that loved and had a connection with these properties or these people. What I've found is that I need to fall in love with that in the same way.

"I was lucky with *Wicked*. I fell in love with *Wicked* from the beginning, so I know what it feels like to be a fan. I know what's at the core and the soul of it, and then I can connect it specifically with a character and emotional journey. To me the heart of a movie is rooting. Who are you rooting for, and what are you rooting for them to do?"



The cast help out Jon M Chu with today's Wordle.

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STOCK ART: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

Cynthia Erivo, Jon M Chu and Ariana Grande have a love-in.

But it's not just characters – *Wicked* brings with it an entire pre-existing world with such dazzling visual iconography as the Yellow Brick Road, the Emerald City and Munchkinland. Chu discusses the challenges of developing Oz for the modern audience while making it stand out among its fantasy counterparts.

"The best thing about remaking something you're a fan of is it forces you to understand why you love it. One of the things that we had to explore, that I did not fully understand was, what *is* Oz? In the design of Oz, what makes Oz *Oz*? Why is Oz different from Neverland or Wonderland?" he ponders. "What we defined is there has to be a reason the Wizard is creating this world of delight, so we had to create this backstory that when he came down on the balloon, everyone was in their own different tribes and they would fight sometimes, but they would figure it out and be in a very natural way of life. But when he came down, he separated everyone and said, 'Hey, you don't have to ever worry again. You don't have to fear ever again. I'll solve your problems, you just be happy.'

> **"I was instantly blown away. It was one of those musicals that you're like, this is already a movie"**

"So then everything in Oz has to be delightful. Whereas in Wonderland, everything there is to drive you a little bit nuts, to drive you a little crazy. Neverland embraces youthfulness and innocence, but Oz specifically was smothering that in delight and distraction. To me, in this story, the goal of Elphaba was to crack that. Everything was circular in Oz, but then there's this crack, the Z in Oz, this →

Glinda's mad for her bubbles.

triangular thing that's coming to pierce these bubbles, pierce these perfect circles, and create what naturally happens, which is a lot of different shapes in all of us."

It wasn't just Oz itself that had to be reimagined; a whole new cast of actors had to be found to fill these roles for a new generation.

"I wanted to have a very clear slate coming into *Wicked*," Chu says. "It's a big enough property on its own, so we can discover two people. I was like, 'We're gonna find no-namers'. But then we got calls from all these great actresses who wanted to audition and we saw *everybody*, and they were all really great. Anyone could have done this role, except there were two people who were *meant* to do this role, for this particular movie at this particular time.

"What we found out when we were auditioning everyone, was that the songs are so important in this movie, and so emotionally important to this movie, that the person who's doing it has to get into song and out of song so easily that it's like butter, like you don't even notice it. That means having good chops in their skill set."

Enter Oz's newest leading ladies, Cynthia Erivo as the green-skinned Elphaba and Ariana Grande as bubble-riding Glinda the Good. "So, Cynthia Erivo, of course, rises to the top of that. So does Ariana Grande. Now, can they embody these characters? Could Ariana? I've never seen her carry a full movie before. Could she commit herself? Could she take off the veil of Ariana Grande and become Glinda?" asks Chu.

"But from the moment she walked in you could feel that she was the most interesting person for Glinda. It wasn't Kristin Chenoweth, but it was Glinda. From the moment we started shooting she lived in the bubble of Glinda. I'm not sure she's even out of the bubble yet! I was →

"So I'm thinking, we put it on your head?"

Ariana Grande shows off her Glinda duds on set.

GALINDAFIED!

Costume designer Paul Tazewell on dressing Oz

Do you recall your first interaction with and impression of *Wicked* as a show?

✦ I had friends who worked on the original Broadway show, working in the costume shops. So I had this backstage view of what that process was like early on. Then to see it realised on stage, to experience that world that they created was really amazing. I was really blown away by what they had done.

When you started work on the film, were there any costumes that you immediately knew would be a challenge?

✦ It was really the overall world. When you experience the musical, you have an idea emblazoned in your head about how beautiful this world is. So the challenge for me became, how do I recreate that vision and still pull in the audience to engage with this new way of seeing the world? It's capturing the energy of what was created originally, but also revisualising it.

There's a pre-existing contrast between these two characters of Elphaba and Glinda, that's set up by the original *The Wizard Of Oz* film. You've got the Wicked Witch in all black with green skin, and then Glinda in pink. You can't change that iconic pairing.

The question then becomes, how do I make that speak to a modern audience and use the classic iconography, but then carry us into the 2020s? It was greatly affected by Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande. They're both fashionistas. They love clothing. They use that as a way to represent themselves, so it was great fun to be a part of that

Tazewell also designed the animals' costumes.

Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba rocks the gothic look.

collaboration with them in how to represent their characters.

Wicked's costumes have remained the same throughout their entire run. Was there pressure to stick to what had been established?

✦ Not really. Jon M Chu made it very clear that he wanted to create a brand new visual idea, visual vocabulary for this film, and I think the newness of it is what makes it exciting. We're birthing this brand new representation of a familiar story and that's really what the stage show does well for *The Wizard Of Oz*. I'd like to think that we're just continuing that.

Glinda has countless costumes. Do you have a favourite?

It's like Barbie meets Wednesday Addams.

✦ I have many favourites. I would say the pink bubble dress is definitely up there as one of them, and that's the one everybody is very familiar with. There are some amazing ones that haven't been fully revealed yet, like her Oz dust ball dress, which is inspired by these roses that were in Regent's Park that were very close to where I was staying.

I'm just very happy with what we were able to bring to her character, because it's a truncated number of looks that you get in the stage production. Our job was to expand that so we get to see more of them day to day and that was really what was exciting.

We could see what her athletic wear is, her play clothes, or when they're running around fields, and just having a great time. We could see these people as real characters, but always defined by Oz.

Were you relieved when you found out the animals would be CG and you wouldn't have to design full-body animal costumes?

✦ Well, I have to correct you there. Though I didn't have to design animal costumes like you see in *The Wizard Of Oz* and the stage show, I did design the costumes for the CG animals. It was very important for Jon and I that they stay in keeping with the world of Oz and the rules and concepts we created. It was important to pull that into the mix of how we were seeing the animals, because they're an integral part of the story.

What do you think made Jon M Chu the right person to bring _Wicked_ to the big screen?

✦ It's his heart. It's his heart and also his brain. The way that he visualises is massive, he has an ability to see things in a very macro way and then zoom in on what is micro. He is always engaging, he's always inspiring.

It was one of those experiences where I felt so in sync with the person I was collaborating with. We were speaking the same language, and when you're working on a project like this, it's imperative that you have that kind of connection.

"And this is me on holiday in the Maldives."

Fiyero, left, soon to be the Scarecrow.

The Wizard himself, with Morrible.

always talking to Glinda. She, of course, has the best comedic timing, but her emotional stuff which people don't even know yet..." he pauses. "The fact that I get to introduce the world to this new Ariana Grande, that's what making movies is all about. It's like, here's your new star, let me show you. You think she's a star already but you don't even *know*. Cynthia Erivo, same thing. To put her in the lead, as this character, it's so her, she takes these words to a whole other planet. I'm excited for the whole world to know Cynthia Erivo's name."

Known for her soaring vocals and gut-wrenching performances, Erivo garnered acclaim for her performance as Celie in *The Color Purple* on Broadway (2015-2017), which won her a Tony and a Grammy. Her leading role in *Harriet* (2019) also bagged her an Academy Award nomination. In 2021 Erivo was featured in the PBS special *Wicked In Concert*, singing "Thank Goodness" only two months before her casting in this film was announced.

While this may simply be coincidence, her co-star Ariana Grande has seemingly been laying the seeds for her casting in *Wicked* for years. She performed "The Wizard And I", an Elphaba solo, during NBC's celebrations for *Wicked*'s 15th year on Broadway. And back in 2012 she duetted with Mika on "Popular Song", a remix from his album *The Origin Of Love* which reworks Glinda's most iconic song "Popular". Over 10 years later, fans will finally be seeing her in the role she's seemingly been destined for.

The two leading witches head a star-studded cast including Jonathan Bailey as heartthrob Fiyero, Michelle Yeoh as sorcery tutor Madame Morrible and Jeff Goldblum as charismatic con artist the Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

"Jeff Goldblum is a genius," Chu says. "His take is always character first, always finding the truth within the person." The Wizard himself doesn't appear too much in the original movie, and in the stage production is oftentimes presented as a misguided, bumbling old man.

However, the trailers have given us a glimpse of what's perhaps a darker interpretation of Oz's beloved Wizard. "Sinister can be done intentionally or unintentionally, and how intentional or unintentional is the Wizard, I think is what you will try to figure out throughout both movies," hopes Chu.

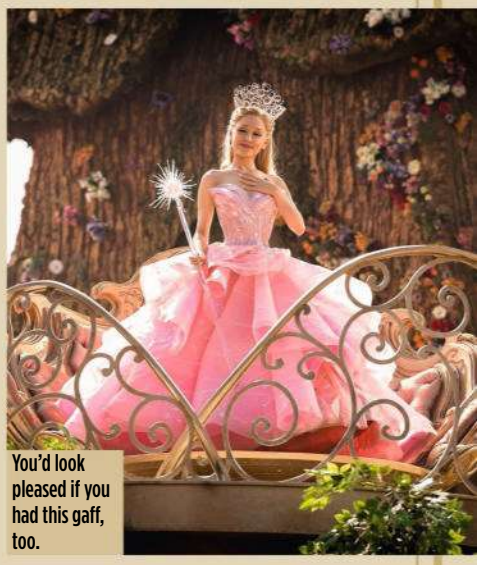
"We talked a lot about the storyteller," he explains. "What's the responsibility of the storyteller if you were trying to delight your audience? What is the responsibility of someone who is trying to get you to look more? If something is exciting to you, then is the storyteller allowed to do that because you'll get more excited?

"You went to the magic show, you wanted to believe that it was real. So isn't that what you want? Then how far will you take it when your distraction gets too far? Are you willing to bring violence? Are you willing to bring spectacle? Are you willing to bring hate and fear?

"Because it's entertaining, and that's what you came to the show for. Maybe those are the questions that the Wizard needs to ask himself." →

"Jazz hands... I must see more jazz hands!"

Oz the Great and Terrible commands you!



You'd look pleased if you had this gaff, too.

An aerial view of one of the locations.

OZMOPOLITAN!

Production designer Nathan Crowley on building Oz

What was your introduction to the world of *Wicked*?

✦ I'm not a massive theatre fan. I'm cinema through and through, I like big cinematic films. So I went to see it a couple of times once they started talking to me. I realised it was an alternative view of Oz and I thought, "I can get into this." We're not trying to remake *The Wizard Of Oz*. We're trying to do a different point of view, which is perfect.

Is it hard to not get whisked away in the land of Oz and go overboard on the magic?

✦ Not really, mainly because we did everything practically. You get lost in it initially with these crazy ideas, but then because you're gonna have to make it, it kind of grounds you, in a weird way.

People think we're insane because we grew nine million tulips, but back in the old film days, even in the last 100 years, that's what you do – you grow it, you build it. Yet now people think you're mad.

How did you approach the Emerald City, something we only got a few glimpses of in the original *Wizard Of Oz* movie?

✦ *The Wizard Of Oz* is an American fairy tale, so we wanted to include some of that iconic Americana architecture such as the White City of Chicago. When you read about the White City, people talk about it like it was Oz, so that was sort of the starting point. With Americana you've got to have a train and so we built that train for real. We had to lay down track, build a station and then eventually we moved it into the Emerald City, because it's got to arrive somewhere. To have a team who could make me a train that actually ran, and get it to go back and forth, was crazy.

When it comes to creating these sets, do you always have in the back of your mind that you're going to have hundreds of people dancing round it?

✦ Yeah, we made big models. We made model after model after model. I'd sit with Jon, with the choreographer and DP and talk through it endlessly. We'd often 3D-print people onto the models to see how many we could fit onto a set.

What's a scene/set you're proudest of that you can't wait for people to see?

✦ I love the "Dancing Through Life" sequence. That specific scene was inspired by Fred Astaire's iconic spinning room dance in [1951 movie] *Royal Wedding*. We had so many moving parts: spinning bookshelves with ladders that moved independently, while parkour dancers were somersaulting all over them. It was very cool to see.

Getting about in Oz is truly arduous.

The train and station are all practical.

Jonathan Bailey as Fiyero. With a horse.

Jeff Goldblum (the Wizard) and Michelle Yeoh (Madame Morrible).

GREENIFY

Hair/make-up designer Frances Hannon on painting Oz

The most prominent use of make-up in the film is Elphaba's green skin. Did you use Margaret Hamilton or the stage make-up as a base, or create something completely new?

✦ Because I was working with a totally different base skin tone, I couldn't start with any of that as my starting point. I started my very first days just experimenting with different greens that were on the market, or taking different greens that were available and mixing them all, to see how it would react on a dark skin tone.

However, I could never get the green to stay stable in the different lights, as a darker skin tone would absorb it. I went through everything that's been made on this Earth just to try and find something that could make it stay more stable in different lights.

Eventually I found a tiny little Canadian eye product that contained neon, and when we added the neon to my green it didn't change the colour, but it fixed all the reflective issues we were having.

Cynthia Erivo is bald-headed – what was the process behind finding her hairstyle?

✦ I started by trying to find the style, and I found it in a book about the history and future of black African hair. I found these microbraids on an artist, and what it did in the visual was it kept its shape; it didn't swamp the person, but you could give it length and really style it a number of ways. We could make it longer, darker and wilder, and we could put it in that iconic large plait while maintaining the basis of the microbraids.

Was it predominantly a lot of wig work?

✦ Every single artist in our film is either wigged or has hair additions of some kind. I don't think people realise that Jonathan's [Bailey] wigged, or Jeff [Goldblum], or anybody really. It's all dictated by character. Fiyero comes from Winky Land and their colour palette is all blues and golds, so I used a lot of gold in his wig which would help visually with his transition into the Scarecrow.

What are you proudest of?

✦ I just love the grandeur and splendour that we were allowed to create. Through all the creatives I really feel like we gelled and managed to find that spectacle and timelessness in it. I truly hope the audience feel we've done them proud because that's the most important thing.

It's not just Elphaba who's be-wigged.

Ariana Grande and chums on set.

It's not easy being green. Just ask Kermit.

> **"If this was one movie, you'd have to take out everything about it that makes it Wicked"**

While Goldblum's Wizard will of course appear in the film, it seems we'll be seeing a lot more of him in a year from now, as what we're getting this month is only the first chapter. *Part Two* is slated for release in November 2025.

"There was a big debate internally. When I first came into this, everything was sort of at a standstill," Chu says of the process behind the decision to split the story in two.

A screen adaptation of *Wicked* had been in the works at Universal since 2009. It was plagued with troubles and release dates that kept changing because of Universal's release of another musical endeavour, *Cats*, and the pandemic. For fans, seeing the witches of Oz on the big screen began to seem like less and less of a possibility.

"They didn't know exactly how to translate *Wicked* properly yet. If this was one movie, you'd have to take out everything about *Wicked* that makes it *Wicked*. You'd have to remove eight songs, skip through things, and it'd make less sense than it ever did on stage," Chu explains. "Even the stage version has gaps that you can sort of fill in, but in a movie, you don't get that. So much so that the first conversation was, 'We have to commit to two movies because the alternatives are not good enough. The alternative is not *Wicked*. You can't cover the span of two lifetimes in one movie.'

"So that was number one, and then the big question became, by the time we get to 'Defying Gravity'" – *Wicked*'s most well-known song and act one finale, and seemingly the end point for this first film – "how do you make that emotionally satisfying so it doesn't feel like half a story? Well, that gave us a great opportunity.

"That means Elphaba better have a great backstory. That means you better know what makes her tick. That means the audience better root for her from day one. From when she sings 'The Wizard And I', I hope you're saying: 'I hope you get to prove yourself; I hope you get it', and then when she gets to the Wizard I hope you say, 'Don't prove yourself to this dude.'

"I hope you get there and say, 'Get out, leave, get out, don't do it!' I hope you're cheering for her when she gets to finally surrender to her own power and not to someone else's. That was the thing that we had to figure out architecturally. I'm really excited about people getting to experience that."

Whether this journey to that mystical land is a reminder of your first trip to the West End, or Christmas Day viewings of your youth, it won't be long until we all take a trip back down the Yellow Brick Road as Chu finally gets to turn the page in his own chapter of Oz history.

Wicked is in cinemas from 22 November.

Besties both on film and in real life.

WITCH PICKINGS

Iconic actors in iconic Ozian roles

Margaret Hamilton originated the role of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard Of Oz*. Infamously, Hamilton caught on fire during a take, leaving her with second-degree burns on her hands and face. As if that weren't bad enough, her green make-up was copper-based and tinged her skin green for weeks.

Jean Marsh played Princess Mombi, aka the Wicked Witch of the North, in Disney's 1985 unofficial quasi-sequel *Return To Oz*.

Mabel King played the Wicked Witch Evillene in *The Wiz*, both in Sidney Lumet's 1978 film adaptation and on Broadway, originating the role, which bagged her a Drama Desk Award nomination.

The Muppets' Wizard Of Oz cast Miss Piggy as both witches. While not green, Miss Piggy's feisty, fiery nature made the perfect Muppet to go up against Ashanti's Dorothy and her Muppet crew.

Disney tried their hand at an *Oz* remake in 2013 with the Sam Raimi-directed *Oz The Great and Powerful*. James Franco starred with Mila Kunis, Michelle Williams and Rachel Weisz as the witches. While the film had a star-studded cast, it failed to kickstart a franchise and has since faded into obscurity.

Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth originated the roles of Elphaba and Glinda in *Wicked* on Broadway. Idina Menzel has since starred as another magic-wielder, Elsa, in the hit Disney films *Frozen* and *Frozen 2*.

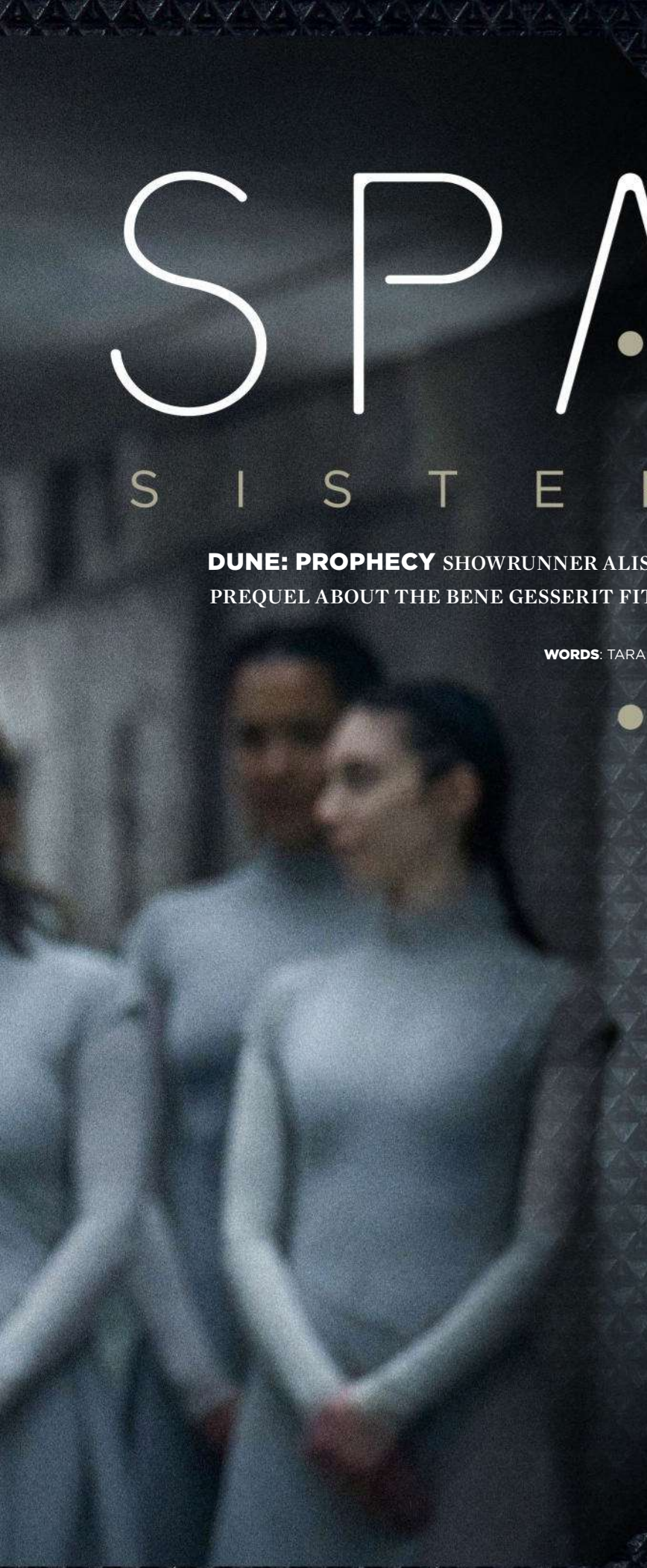
Lucie Jones, originally an *X Factor* contestant in 2009, has since become a leading West End star – she donned the cloak and black pointy hat for *Wicked* in 2022.

SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY; BUENA VISTA/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK; THE JIM HENSON COMPANY/FOX

SPACE SISTERHOOD

DUNE: PROPHECY SHOWRUNNER ALISON SCHAPKER EXPLAINS WHERE THE PREQUEL ABOUT THE BENE GESSERIT FITS IN THE FRANK HERBERT TIMELINE

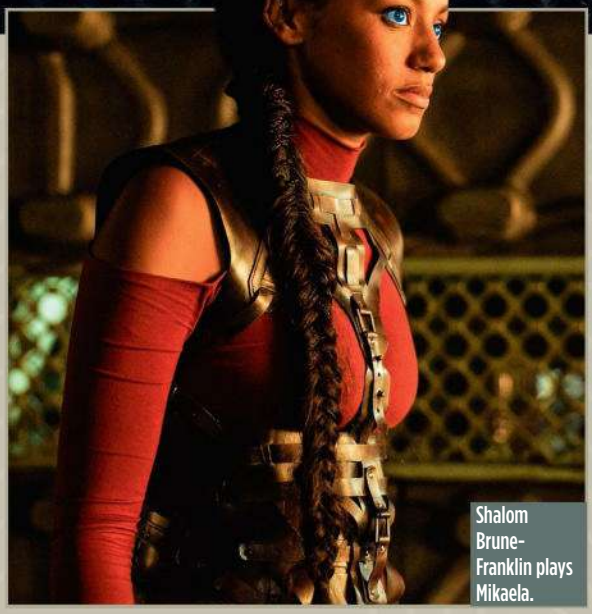
WORDS: TARA BENNETT



SOMETIMES THE UNIVERSE CORRECTS ITSELF FOR the better. Way back in 2016 when Legendary Entertainment bought the rights to sci-fi author Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels, self-professed devotee Denis Villeneuve was quickly attached to direct a film adaptation of the first book and develop a spin-off streaming series about the powerful, all-female Bene Gesserit order. Villeneuve's two *Dune* films became critical sensations and secured a green light for the streaming show.

As often happens in Hollywood, all the creatives announced in 2019 to be developing the show were men, which promptly earned the vocal criticism of Herbert's granddaughter, Kim Herbert. Five years on, the series has been through a creative gender realignment and arrives as the HBO/Sky Original *Dune: Prophecy*, showrun by genre veteran Alison Schapker (*Alias*, *Fringe*), directed by Anna J Foerster, and starring Emily Watson, Olivia Williams (*The Nevers*) and Jihae (*Altered Carbon*).

Most recently an executive producer on season four of HBO's *Westworld*, Schapker tells *SFX* that when she was approached about joining the in-progress development of *Dune: Prophecy*, she leaped at the chance to put her sci-fi-loving hands on Herbert's mysterious and supernaturally imbued order of power players. →



Shalom Brune-Franklin plays Mikaela.

Travis Fimmel as Desmond Hart.

"For me, working in genre, it does feel a bit like my career has kind of led up to this," Schapker says of her showrunner position on *Dune: Prophecy*. "Going back to *Alias*, I always enjoyed delving into worlds and universes. I think genre and science fiction are some of the most exciting, imaginative spaces to be in as a fan and also as a writer.

"So when I heard that *Dune: Prophecy* was happening and that I could be a part of it, I didn't ask any other questions. Really, at that point, it was just an undeniable opportunity for me."

SANDS OF TIME

Dune: Prophecy is a prequel to Herbert's *Dune* books and Villeneuve's film adaptations. Set 10,148 years before the time of Paul Atreides, the series dives into the life of second Mother Superior of the Sisterhood Valya Harkonnen (Watson), the most consequential architect of the matriarchal order which will eventually come to be known as the Bene Gesserit.

After a massive war among the universe's family Houses over the rise of destructive "thinking machines" (think AI and elevated computers), the Harkonnen House is on the losing end of the fight. They're banished along with that tech, and young Valya (Jessica Barden) becomes consumed with restoring her family's place in the universe.

All of that history was first laid out in the prequel trilogy of books written by Herbert's son Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson, in particular *Sisterhood Of Dune* (2012) and *Mentats Of Dune* (2014). *Dune: Prophecy* is essentially the bridging story that fits between *Mentats* and *Navigators Of Dune* (2016).

"I think what Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson did in setting their novels 10,000 years before, and looking at the rise of the Bene Gesserit and the rise of the Sisterhood as one of the great schools, along with other schools that were rising at the time, just seemed like such an exciting way to speak to the films, but also to be our own thing and shape it from our perspective," Schapker says of the setting of their show.

> **"All of it is very real and rooted in the Dune universe and very real human suffering"**

Jihae plays Reverend Mother Kasha.

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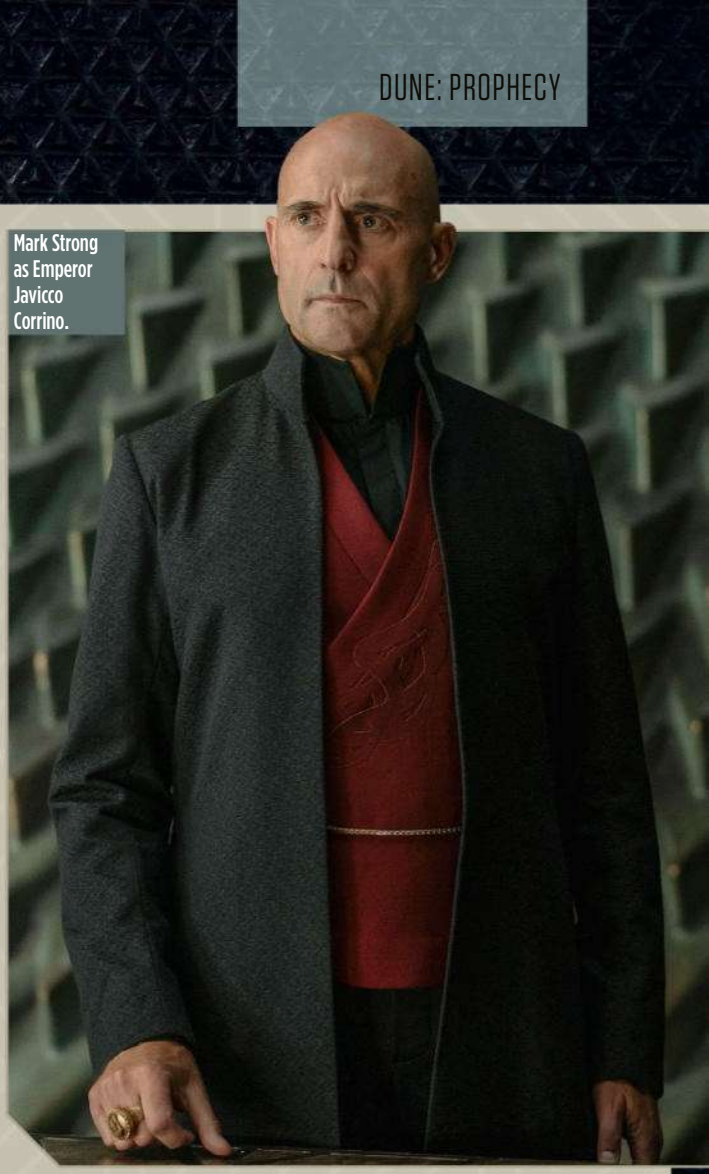
Emily Watson as Valya Harkonnen and Olivia Williams as Reverend Mother Tula Harkonnen.



Mark Strong as Emperor Javicco Corrino.

"So *Sisterhood Of Dune* is the seminal text," she explains. "We're inspired by the novel. We're setting our story, in many ways, within events from the novel. Our characters stem from the novel. But we've also worked with the Herbert estate and Brian and Kevin throughout the process, because we also wanted to look at the lives of our characters in two different time periods."

Structurally, *Dune: Prophecy* straddles two major time periods to tell Valya's personal story, and her orchestrated placement of Reverend Mothers from her school as advisors in all the great Houses of power. In flashbacks, young Valya becomes the favoured acolyte of Sisterhood founder Raquella Berto-Anirul and her eventual successor.

Thirty years into the future, an older and savvier Valya works alongside her sister Tula Harkonnen (Williams) to train young women at their school to become advisors, with the goal of having one become an Empress of the Imperium to do their bidding.

"[Older] Valya has grown the Sisterhood and has attained a certain level of power in the Imperium, and we look at the costs and the price of what it means to get there and how she did it," Schapker says. "In that regard, we were in some ways out in new territory, but much in conjunction with Brian's sensibility in the books, and trying to be very coherent and careful."

Whereas the *Dune* films were very male power-centric, this show is extremely focused on the machinations of the Sisterhood and those they touch in their universe. "One in the long list of great things about this property is that they've always had strong, complicated women who exist in relationship to power, have skills and motivations, and specific backstories," Schapker notes.

"They are there in the halls of power, operating in the shadows, but also publicly in other ways. It was already baked-in, but to focus on it is super-exciting. So we have a pair of sisters at the heart of the series."

DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

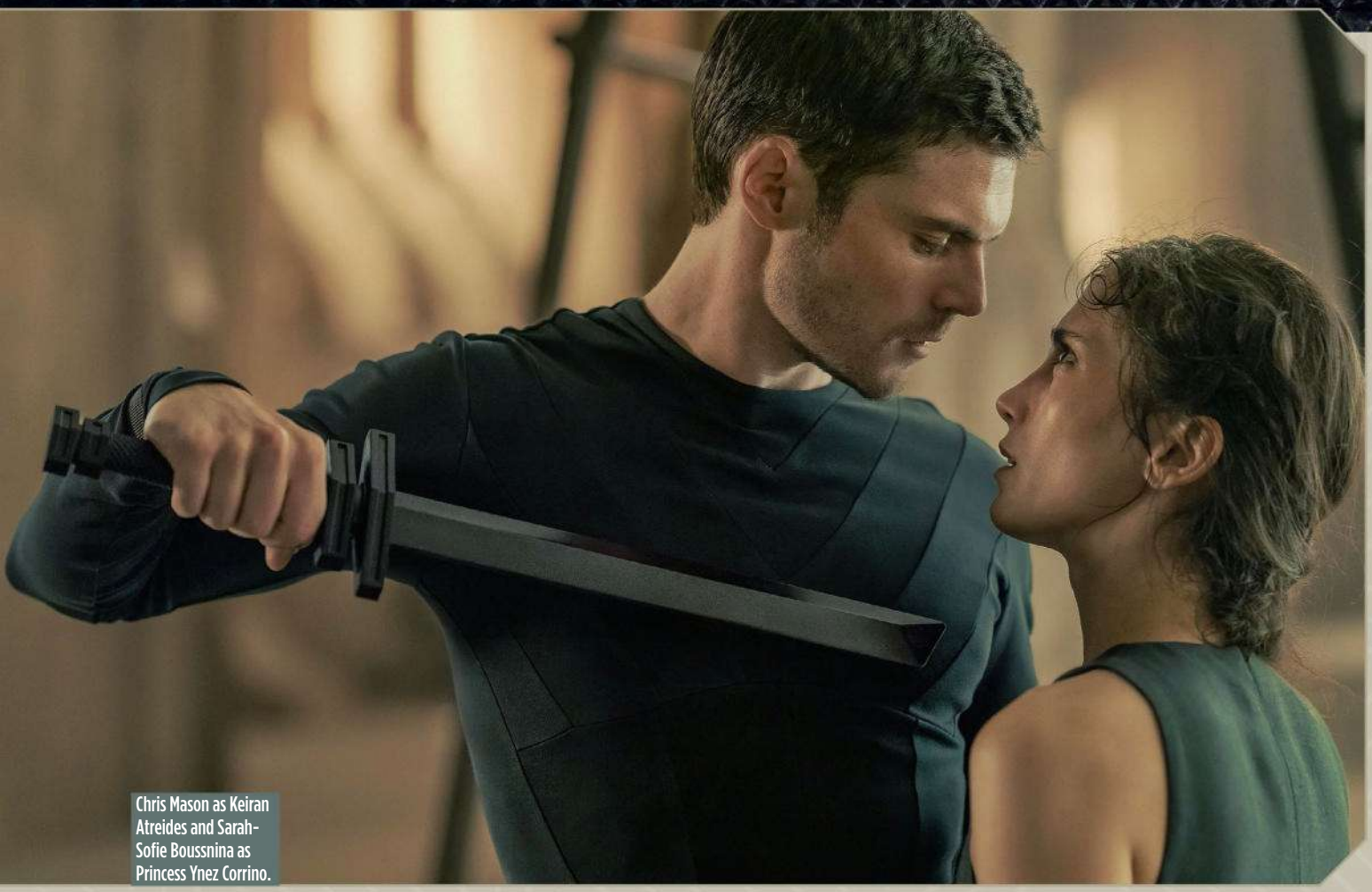
For the Sisterhood stories, the Harkonnen sisters primarily do their work in the past and present on the oft-referenced planet of Wallach IX. In the future, Salusa Secundus sets the stage for the dysfunctional family politicking of beleaguered Imperium Emperor Javicco Corrino (Mark Strong), his increasingly sidelined wife Empress Natalya (Jodhi May), their daughter Princess Ynez (Sarah-Sofie Boussnina), and his illegitimate son Constantine Corrino (Josh Heuston).

"The Emperor and Empress' marriage is, I would say, under strain, and their relationships to their children are complicated," Schapker says of the very relatable problems found in this family. "Some of that is of their own making, and some of that is because of the history and losses that their family has endured.

"Also, the various influences outside forces have, because they're so visible. They're right there, occupying the throne with the heir to the throne. They're targets, in some ways, for other actors who want to exert power through them."

In the six episodes of season one, Schapker says almost everything is seen through the lens of Valya and Tula's experiences. "Valya is absolutely thinking about the future and the future of the Imperium and the future of the Sisterhood, and has goals for humanity.

"All of it is very real and rooted in the *Dune* universe and very real human suffering and human tragedy of the war against thinking machines. But at the same time, she is a girl who comes from a planet that she was →



Chris Mason as Keiran Atreides and Sarah-Sofie Boussnina as Princess Ynez Corrino.

banished to, who feels not seen by her family. She has ambition that she's told is 'too much', and eventually sets off to form a new family in the Sisterhood. That person's desire for power, and what it means to her as an individual, is also specific. I think the series is fun because I hope it gets audiences asking those questions."

There's also a marked difference in older Valya and younger Tula's approach to the acquisition of power and how they treat their young students. "I think that the Harkonnen sisters have a sisterly relationship that is very specific to their upbringing," Schapker says of the push and pull between them.

"There's an older sister/younger sister dynamic, which I think happens for a lot of siblings, where the older sister maybe doesn't see the younger sister on equal footing for many years. That can unlock a vision of realising that what once was my younger sister, who I discounted, actually has turned into a formidable force different from me, but somebody who the older sister sees and respects in a new way.

"That's one of the things we try to depict: where Valya and Tula started, versus how they ended up together. That dynamic between the older sister feeling in charge, or feeling like they know better, and the younger sister being more of a follower is something that is both embedded in their relationship, but also something that has become more complicated as we meet them as mature women.

> **"There's an older/younger sister dynamic, which I think happens for a lot of siblings"**

"It's been a great gift and privilege to work with Emily Watson and Olivia Williams, who are such powerhouse actors," she says of the women who play out this sibling rivalry. "They ground their performances in so much nuance and truth. It's kind of a masterclass. We're so grateful for that."

Mark Addy, unrecognisable as Evgeny Harkonnen.

Schapker adds that the sisters' influence will spill out into how their students internalise the school's lessons as they become the next generation of Reverend Mothers, such as Valya's favourite Sister Theodosia (Jade Anouka) and a true zealot of their mission, Sister Emeline (Aoife Hinds).

"How is the ideology interfacing with the next generation that's going to come up and expect to lead?" she poses. "Our acolytes at the Sisterhood, while you meet them in season one and they have secrets and they have pasts, we're going to get to know them better and understand them more as the show goes on.

"They're going to play a larger and larger role in our design for the series. These students are special. They all will have a big impact on how the Sisterhood develops over time."

Building a complex ensemble of characters in satellite locations, *Dune: Prophecy* shares similarities to the *Game Of Thrones* shows, with an emphasis on expansive world-building and character connections. Schapker says they took their cues from the way Villeneuve's films →

HOLY TERROR

Jessica Barden plays young Valya Harkonnen, on a mission to redeem her family House

What was your entry point into the *Dune* universe?

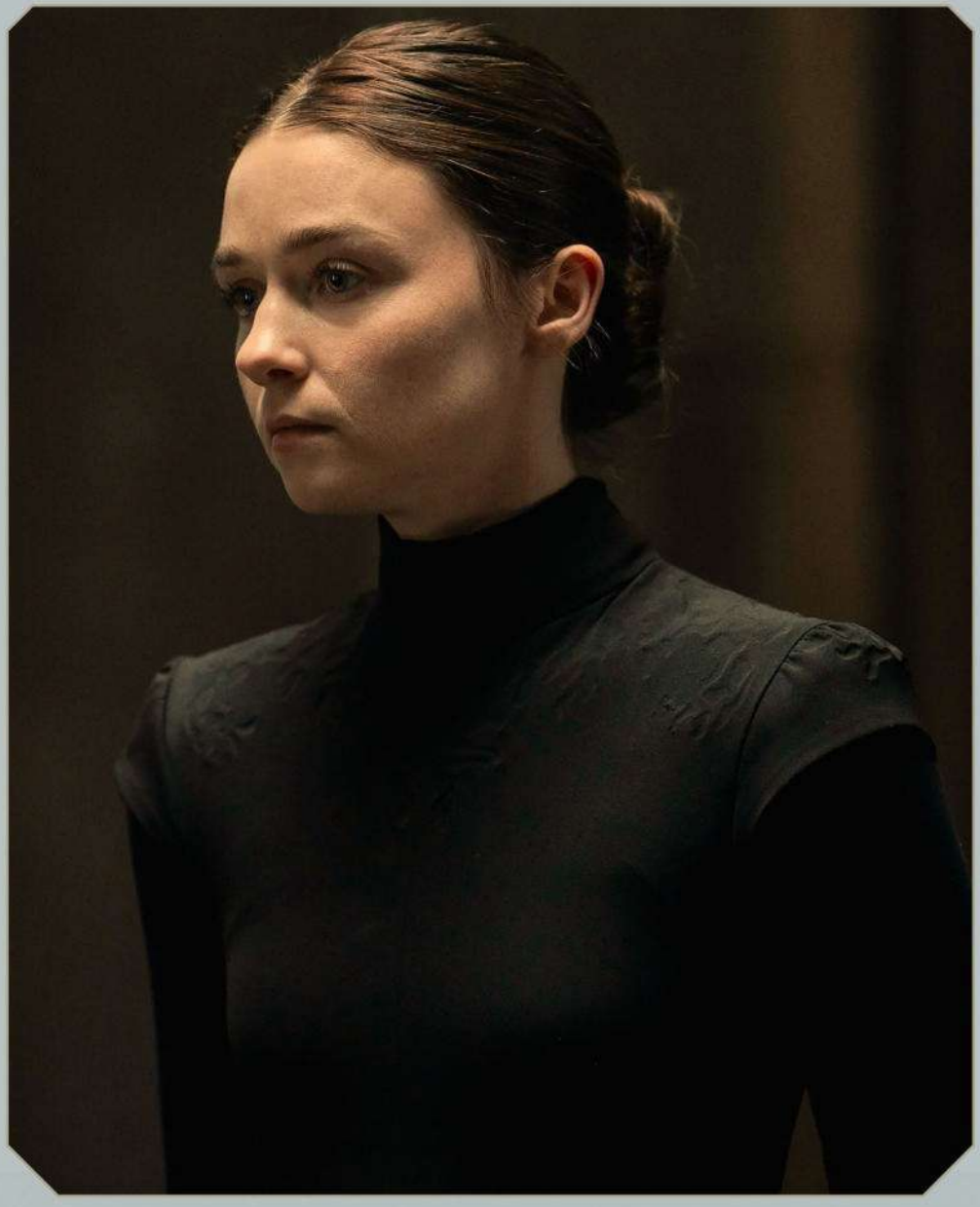
I was a huge fan of the [latest] movies. That was how I was introduced to *Dune*. I love Charlotte Rampling and that scene in the movie with Timothée Chalamet I thought would be the coolest thing in the world to act. So when Alison [Schapker] called me, I was like, "This is *exactly* my thing. Space nuns that are evil and have sex? This is *completely* me!"

How did you see the character of Valya? As a true believer in prophecy, or a very savvy acquirer of power?

I always felt like I wanted to make my version of Valya uncomplicated. Just, who is this person that you meet for the first time, who begins to provide context for an audience that thinks the Harkonnens are completely, irredeemably bad? I think it's gonna blow the audience away learning so much about that family and that history.

Is there a particular episode integral to Valya's evolution?

Yes, I did so much work in episode three. It's probably as close to an old-school HBO, indie movie version of *Dune*. It goes into the backstory of Valya a lot more, and that particular episode gave me context that the Valya I play needs to be completely grounded in the total authenticity of any young person, anywhere in the world who is like, "Fuck this, I won't accept this. *This* is what I'm doing." It's a mixture of blind excitement of having nothing to lose. Also, she's maybe a psychopath. It's like playing Ted Bundy, in a way.



Valya gets to do the infamous Bene Gesserit voice. How did you find it?

On the day when you're doing the voice, it's the least scary thing that anyone has ever heard. The way that we filmed it, I would have to do some where I held it for a very long amount of time, or had to do it very slowly. We spent a long time working on it in post, which was really fun.

So on the day, the way that it sounds is not really important. I just had to concentrate on having it be this very authentic and non-contrived thing, because obviously it is a very specific and well-known thing.

Is there a character that most informs young Valya in this season?

Mother Superior Raquella is this tremendous light in her life, and really, for the rest of her life, is the only person that sees something good in her. And Tula. This battle that Valya and Tula have is envy between two women and two siblings, and then also, just needing to survive together because they don't have anything else.

What was it like building a shared character with Emily?

I loved working with her, even though I only had one day filming with her. It's kind of sad. We both said the same thing about the character when we wrapped. It's such a hard character to stop playing because she's so powerful.

Valya is probably the most powerful character that you could ever really play because she literally possesses the ability to control people. You don't really want to stop playing this person. It's my favourite job I've ever done.

POWER RIVAL

Jodhi May is an Empress muzzled by a muted marriage and an overbearing Sisterhood

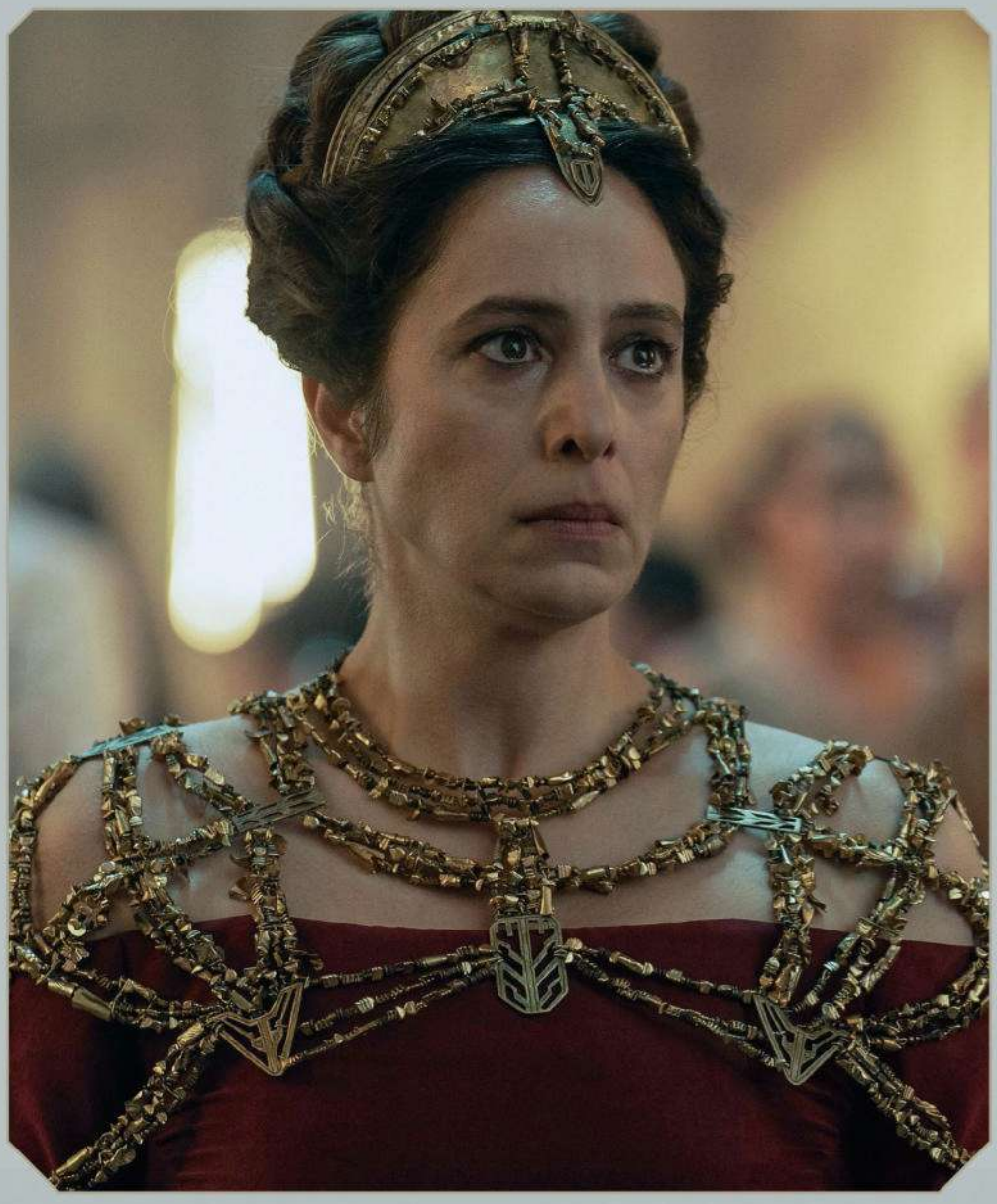
How would you describe the marriage of Emperor Javicco Corrino and Empress Natalya?

It is a really interesting relationship, charting the journey between those two characters. He's kind of emasculated by the Sisterhood and the Bene Gesserit, so within the machinations of the Imperium, there's also the disillusionment of a woman who was once in love with this man.

There's a sense of her personal disappointment and the sense of how to make the best of a marriage that is so completely undermined on so many fronts. You imagine this is a power couple in the White House, and you've got a woman who's really smart and trying to say to her husband, "Look, for a second here, can you just not rely on your political advisors? Can we just speak to each other as human beings?" But I like the fact that there's a dysfunctional family relationship there to play on. Those scenes were great between me and Mark [Strong]. We really relished the intimate drama that was in our scenes as a couple.

How does the Empress feel about her husband's Sisterhood advisor?

Natalya is completely sceptical about the Bene Gesserit, and she absolutely, deeply and profoundly mistrusts them. She's interesting because, in a sense, she's everything they're not. She's about intuition. She's about relying on the gut instinct. So she's one of the few characters who isn't in awe of the Bene Gesserit. She's a bit of an outsider in that respect. She doesn't buy into this notion.



The Empress also has a complex relationship with her headstrong daughter, Princess Ynez...

Yes, a lot of this drama, especially in terms of my character, is about mothers and daughters as well. I would say that as much as my character's relationship is defined by her husband, it is also defined by her relationship with her daughter. That's really full of incredible dynamics to explore as well.

There are a lot of series that I can think of where that's just presented to you as a part of history. In this, it's really taken apart and deconstructed. The nature of power is questioned in terms of gender, societally, psychologically, emotionally, between mom and daughter and between women themselves.

In this architecture of power, Alison's really dissecting, what does power mean? That's an exciting proposition for any series. Also, we shouldn't forget that a lot of sci-fi writers were women.

This series very much has women to the fore. Did you feel that while making it?

Yes. What I love about the way that Alison explores female characters and female ambition and female desire is that she's not afraid to go to women wanting to be the only powerful woman in the room. That's really exciting to see play out.

Interestingly enough, watching the first episode, I went to see it with Emily and there were only two scenes where there are any men on screen. It's fantastic. For me, that drive that Alison has to throw down the gauntlet and go even further is a really exciting and refreshing one. I think her female characters are all the more exciting for it.

It's an interesting genre in which women can transcend the confines of the traditional and social/political norms.

Jodhi May plays Empress Natalya-Arat.

introduced supporting characters in the first film who then bloomed in importance as the narratives unfolded.

"You always know that every character, even if they can't be on the screen or taking you into the world that they come from necessarily, you know that they could," she explains. "They're serious enough, their performances are strong enough, and they're written specifically enough that you just feel the world in a real way.

"We tried very hard to keep our eyes on the prize on the one hand, in terms of throughline and what we wanted you to take away from the Harkonnen sisters and the Sisterhood. But everybody's playing a role in the Imperium. If they're on our screen, it's because they're representative of this very large tapestry.

"That's the hardest thing, to do justice to the complexity of the world and still make it emotionally engaging and accessible and entertaining and moving. Yet not sacrifice the nuance that is there to begin with."

Schapker is also quick to add that they spent a lot of time crafting *Dune: Prophecy* to be an easy entry point for *Dune* fans, or just the *Dune*-curious. "You don't need to have read the books, and you don't even need to see Denis's films, or David Lynch's *Dune*, or other *Dune* television series," she emphasises. "This can be a point of entry if that's how you're approaching *Dune*. If you're a *Dune* super-fan, I also think it's really fun to come to this with all the knowledge." On a personal level, Schapker says it's both "exciting" and "incredibly humbling" to get to play in Herbert's sandbox – especially in light of her own teenage years. She vividly remembers first reading Herbert's *Dune* in the attic of her family home. "Very few books have that sort of Proustian memory rush," she says. "I really feel like it was a mind-blowing book to read, so I have these sense memories of reading it that stand out in the way that not all sci-fi books do."

> **"I really feel like it was a mind-blowing book to read, so I have these sense memories of it"**

Emily Watson's Valya Harkonnen.

She hopes that she and her writers can pass that along to a new generation, and do Herbert and his family proud. "It's almost something I don't think about that much because it's a bit terrifying," she admits as *Dune: Prophecy* inches closer to broadcast.

"At the same time, I've always been, in my whole career, very much someone who tries to do the best that I can do that day. *Dune* is a real mountain to climb, and I've had incredible collaborative people around me.

"To work with such an inspiring property, with people who are just so unbelievably talented, it does feel, on some level, almost a bit like a dream, or like you're having a *Dune* hallucination," she laughs.

Dune: Prophecy is on Max, Sky and NOW from 15 November.

STOCK ELEMENTS: GEENGRAPHY, MARYLIADESIGN, SEAMARTIN/GETTY

GOING SOLO

APPLE'S ACCLAIMED SCI-FI SILO RETURNS AFTER ITS SHOCKING, TWISTY FINALE. SHOWRUNNER GRAHAM YOST BREAKS DOWN WHAT'S NEXT

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

WHEN *JUSTIFIED'S* Graham Yost started adapting the first instalment in Hugh Howey's Silo trilogy, *Wool*, for television, something quickly became clear: the debut season would end at the book's midpoint. "We just knew that Juliette going over the hill and seeing 50 other silos was a great way to end a season," he tells *SFX*. "Then, in the writers' room, we had to ask: 'How do we start season two?'"

So how do you restart a show that has – spoilers – killed off so many of its most important characters? *Silo*'s pilot introduced the Beckers, played by Rashida Jones and David Oyelowo, a happy couple told by their overlords that they can have a baby. You see, the Beckers live in an underground silo where the inhabitants know nothing of the outside world except the air is polluted and everyone who surfaces dies within seconds.

Yet despite this knowledge, Allison Becker is convinced the silo's leaders are hiding something and she volunteers to go outside and "clean" – in other words, wipe the lens of a camera allowing the silo-dwellers to see what's above them. Upon leaving the silo, she sees a wonderful, fertile world and signals as much to her husband... and then she dies for reasons unknown.

The following season of television – well-reviewed by critics and fans of the books alike – is ripe with conspiracy as Oyelowo's Holston Becker, the silo's sheriff, seeks the truth about what happened to his wife. He soon meets the engineer Juliette Nichols, played by Rebecca Ferguson, who quickly becomes the series' protagonist after Holston also goes outside... and dies.

Juliette picks up the pieces of Becker's investigation, which happens to involve her lover George, who... mysteriously dies. By the season's finale, Juliette leaves the silo and →

discovers that the outside world is genuinely uninhabitable and that the digital displays of the cleaners' helmets have been tricking them that things were different. But Juliette's one step ahead; unlike the other cleaners, she sees past the facade, and is wearing a protective suit that actually works thanks to special tape.

She then refuses to clean the camera and walks out beyond the corpses of the Beckers – beyond the hill blocking the camera's view – and sees dozens of other silos littering the land. How will she survive in this new world?

PHYSICAL GRAFFITI

"The finale's not a cliffhanger," Yost says. "Well, it's sort of one, but Rebecca Ferguson's face is on the poster [for season two]. Chances are she's not going to die."

We can confirm Juliette's not dead. In fact, upon leaving her silo, she decides to head to the nearest other one, where things are bleak: hundreds of decaying bodies are littered outside. She enters the silo – seemingly abandoned – only to discover that a weird, hairy man named Solo, played by Steve Zahn, has locked himself behind a vault door. But why the hell is he there? And why is everyone else dead?

These are the questions Yost wants you to be asking. "The show, ultimately, is a mystery show," he says. "Why were the silos built? When did humanity go inside? What's going on? The first season was pulled along by the mystery of what happened to George. This season, it is the mystery of Solo."

So who is Solo? Yost's giving nothing away. "I like to cast people who are funny, because when they go dramatic it suddenly has a punch. Everything he does, the way he behaves, when you find out the answer to the mystery, you go, 'Okay, now I get it.'"

But let's go back a second, because we don't meet Solo straight away in season two. The very first scene focuses on a rebellion in full swing. A silo's sheriff – played by Ross McCall (*Band Of Brothers*) – leads an angry mob against his overlords. The mob overthrows its leadership. They go outside and... they die, becoming the corpses Juliette later climbs over.

What Juliette doesn't realise is that while she's clambering over the dead, reluctant villain Bernard (Tim Robbins), the leader of her silo, watches via video. "Bernard says to [his accomplice] Judge Meadows, 'I saw what looked like a silo that had gone to war with itself', and that just terrifies him," Yost says.

"His fear, from the beginning, is that people are going to storm the airlock and go outside and seeing those bodies leads to questions. Don't people usually just drop in about a minute outside? How did all those people get outside without information coming back that they're all dying out here? Why did they keep going?"

More questions! At least one thing is clear: the second season won't abandon those left behind in the original silo. Indeed, while the first episode is solely about Juliette and her adventure beyond her known world, the second takes place entirely in the original silo and deals with the aftermath of Juliette deciding not to clean. It turns out a rebellion is brewing, and the letters JL – standing for "Juliette Lives" – appear in graffiti form up and down the deep silo.

"Juliette, right from the beginning, has no interest in being a hero," Yost says. "She has no interest in meaning anything to anyone except friends on a personal level, and yet she ends up inspiring a rebellion in her home silo. When people start painting 'JL' on the walls, it's like this is what they're going to rally behind. She would just wave that off. That's not her. She's an engineer."

Juliette starts the season more focused on staying alive than anything else – but that doesn't stop her from having regrets, especially as she realises that, by choosing not to clean, her silo may end up having the same fate as the one she's forced her way into.

"The rebellion in Solo's silo started when there was a failed cleaning, and people thought it was safe outside. She knows it's not safe outside, so she wants to get home [and warn them]," Yost says. "Getting home is one of the three basic storylines in all literature. That's her quest. And in order to get home, she has to get through Solo."

DEEPER UNDERGROUND

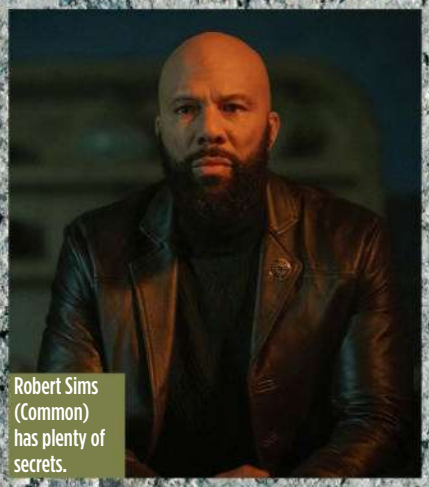
Back in the original silo, we learn more about the surviving characters from season one: head of security Robert Sims (Common), Juliette's stand-in mother Martha Walker (Harriet Walter), and the ambitious Judge Meadows (Tanya Moodie) all have expanded roles, going deeper than their book counterparts.

"In the second half of Hugh's first book, Juliette goes over to the other silo and meets Solo in a different way, and there's something big that she has to do this season, something that requires almost superhuman effort, and we've changed it up a little bit," Yost says.

"Then there's the other silo where certain characters die in the book but don't die in the show. We also did gender flips – Walker is a man in the book. But Hugh was with us right from the beginning of the writers' room, before we even started the first season.

"He'd be like, 'Oh, we could kill this person or that person off.' He was very cavalier about it, and very supportive of the changes we made because he knows we have to give the audience what they want, but we owe it to them to do a different version. We need to give them what they want in a way they don't expect."

The biggest challenge of the second season was balancing the stories of the two silos



Robert Sims (Common) has plenty of secrets.

Prepare to meet a host of new characters.

PICTURES © APPLE TV+. STOCK ART: TONGSUR/GETTY, KADIR BARCIN/THINKSTOCK

Juliette (Rebecca Ferguson) goes outside.

– from episode three onwards, the stories are more spliced together. "There is an episode where Juliette is notably absent, and you don't realise she's absent until the end of the episode, and then you find out why," Yost teases.

That also meant the production team had to create two different silos. "When you mix it up, introducing new things, it's not cheap," Yost explains. "When you come up with a whole new thing, like, 'Oh, we're going to be in a different silo for half the season', people are like, 'Okay, how do we organise that? Because we can't afford to build two staircase sets.'

"What it means is you have to turn the first silo into this other silo. Then you ask, 'How are things different in that silo? Is the clothing different? In a cultural sense, were they on a different route?' Our production team came up with a lot of stuff. There's far less electricity, less light, and lots of dead plants in the second silo. They had simple, uniform clothing. It was all about world-building."

The team also used visual effects to a new degree this season. "There are big sequences this season that are stunning to look at and to inhabit," Yost says.

> **"This is not a long SF series. It's a trilogy. We're not going to extend it beyond that"**

By the end of the second season, we will be one step closer to the conclusion of Howey's book series. "We've got plans for how the series would play out if we get to do the whole thing," Yost says. How many seasons? "That number's between me and my friends at Apple TV+," he laughs. "But we're not going to drag it on too long.

"The books are a trilogy. This is not *Outlander*. This is not a long science fiction series. It's a trilogy. We're not going to extend it beyond that. That doesn't mean it's going to be three seasons, but it's not going to be 10."

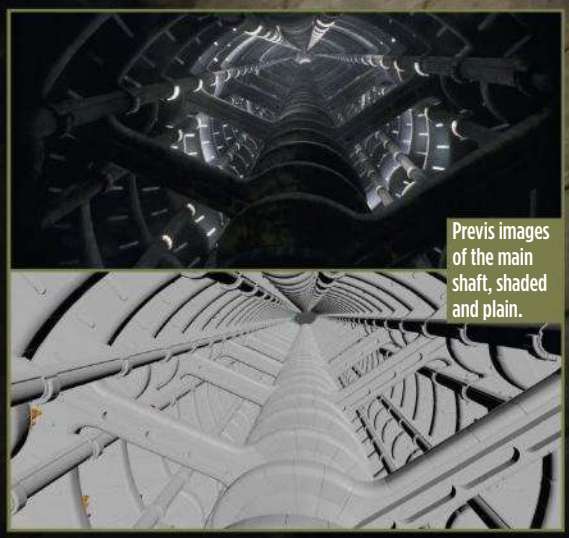
And yes, by the end of the series, should it be renewed, we will know what happened outside the silos. "It is our goal to answer questions and not frustrate the audience, but deliver things in a logical time, so that when our characters find something out, that's when the audience finds out," Yost says.

"We could have shown right from the beginning that there are 50 other silos, but we needed it to come through Juliette. She's ultimately our guide. But without being too coy, I will say there is something in the final episode of this season... and that's all I'll say."

Silo is on Apple TV+ from 22 November.

Bernard (Tim Robbins): is he a goodie or a baddie?

DESIGNING



Previs images of the main shaft, shaded and plain.

CONCRETE JUNGLE

Gavin Bocquet: When you start, there's always that element of, "How do we achieve this?" It's not like you can go and shoot this on the streets of London. It doesn't exist. With this, I hadn't read the novels, but I knew roughly that we were going to need to create this underground silo. That was going to be a challenge because, although the budget was good, there's never enough money, time or stage space to do what you have to do.

So the first thing was to conceptualise what this world looks like. We had six or eight weeks of concept work, doing research, and showing it to [showrunner] Graham Yost and [director] Morten Tyldum. The general feeling was that the architectural style should reference Eastern socialist architecture of the '40s and '50s – concrete, very austere, very functional, very nondescript. Using concrete would give us a lot of room to manoeuvre with finishes and textures, and would allow us to show people where they were in the silo – slightly better conditions up top, and damp and crumbling down below. In some of the early concepts, we introduced quite a lot of supporting metalwork, but they made it look too "sci-fi".

Amanda Bernstein: I wrote a blurb about how the higher up the silo you are, the brighter the colours and the more beautiful it is. The less recycled the things are. Anything made of glass at the top of the silo is always flawed and there are always bubbles in the glass. It's not quite clear. The further you go down, the glass is grey or dirty brown, because everything was recycled. Linens at the top could be natural, off-white, and by the time you get down to Juliette, her linen quilt is a dark brown. It had been mended, it had gone through the whole recycling system several times. You have to make rules for yourself that no one else has to know about.

SILO

THE EMMY-WINNING DESIGN TEAM BEHIND SILO – SET DECORATOR AMANDA BERNSTEIN AND PRODUCTION DESIGNER GAVIN BOCQUET – TALK *SFX* THROUGH CREATING THE SHOW'S UNDERGROUND WORLD OF SEASON ONE WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD AND DARREN SCOTT**

A previs render for scale reference.

Prismatic shades diffuse the limited light available.

LIGHTING A SILO

AB: I did a lot of research on early electrical lighting; how they used prismatic shades to get as much light out of every watt spent, because there's no natural light down in the silo. There were certain rules that we made up, like how in all the apartments there are herb walls growing. So there are a lot of grow lights everywhere, so nobody gets sick. You just have to accept that.

STICK TO THE SCRIPT

GB: The world existed in Graham's scripts, which were really insightful, and in Hugh Howey's novels, but he didn't have any particular feelings about the design. He said, "Look, when I write these novels, I have an idea of how this should look, but everybody who reads the novels probably has a different idea". So that gave us quite a lot of freedom to do our own thing. When I've done shows before where you have source material that have been books, I tend to avoid reading them, just because they're different to the scripts. The written novel is a very different thing than storytelling in film. Some things you write on the page in the novel don't work on film. So we were quite free. →

PHOTOGRAPHY BY REKHA GARTON, BEN MEADOWS © APPLE TV+

CHANGING ROOMS

AB: We were on the show for a long time. The challenge was just the relentlessness of there being so many sets. There were something like 75 or 80 sets. Sometimes I wouldn't have a lot of time to dress a set, from when it was built to when they were shooting it. Sometimes there was more than one director shooting, and I was constantly struggling to catch up with designing furniture, or propping it, or running onto the next set to dress it. Time was at a minimum.

GB: We had to have 20 apartments for different characters, and those are really important places because they really help explain the character. How do we create personal environments for these characters? We didn't have the space or money to build 20 apartments. So the architecture was modular. Each apartment could be turned into four or five other apartments. We would move the kitchen to where the bar was, or where the bedroom was. So although they had the same architectural style, none of the 20 apartments were the same layout, geographically.

AB: There were a lot of the things that were supposed to be European functional furniture, as if they came from the standard silo factory for chairs. So I would reuse chairs from sets, or age something down, and then it was like, "Oh, that set's coming back in a script we hadn't read yet!" It was like, "Oh no, we have to buy the same chair again", and I had found it in an antique market. So we tried to keep every set and all the props separate, otherwise I would get into trouble.

Apartment design was modular to mix and match.

The cafeteria set, with "outside" view.

More previs renders showing the layout.

An example of a set within a set, in the marketplace.

Just enough set height to create the illusion...

LAYERS OF FILTH

AB: I loved designing Walker's workshop because there were layers upon layers of stuff. She didn't leave her apartment workshop, so there were just loads of bits and bobs. Then you've got the generator room. That was incredible, to do all the consoles. Although it's beautifully designed, it had to be dressed. You had to get the lights right, and the level of grubbiness. I was always going around with a big bag of fake dirt, just to put layers on top of everything, to give it a layer of filth. I was thrilled that in one review it said you could see the levels of filth. I was like, "Oh, that's me with a bag of dirt!"

RUSSIAN DOLL SETS

GB: One of the sets was a circular cafeteria with a big screen inside. Another was the circular marketplace. We built that inside the cafeteria, and then the circular IT room where you first see Tim Robbins was built within the marketplace within the cafeteria. So we shot the IT section, then pulled it all out which revealed the market set, and then pulled the market set out which revealed the cafeteria set. It was like an inverse Russian doll.

Also, there was the main sheriff's office, where you first see the sheriff. In later episodes, there are two deputy offices down deep. Both of those were built inside the sheriff's office using the same floor and the same ceiling. We were making use of the stage space. You remove a set and suddenly you're back in the other set.

That cafeteria [above] is in the alleyway set. We had to dress that as a little cafe. You could see that little corner with the piano in probably five shots. That's a typical example where we recycled the set, because if you came back four days later, the cafeteria would have been a different building. With the piano, there are musical instruments in the show. There's a little band in the market, but they are using instruments that had come from junk and been recycled into another thing. →

FINDING RELICS

AB: In the script, it said, "Box of relics." So we were like, "What classes as a relic?" There were scripted relics like the Pez dispensers, and we scoured the internet for Pez dispensers with ducks on them. You didn't want a Disney duck head or anything. Of course, we could have designed anything we wanted because we had a great prop-making team, but we wanted something that everyone would recognise. I think it was an old Pez, the one we used. For other relics, we bought a few online, and the writers came back with a list of things that we could use. I remember there was a shuttlecock and a little Statue of Liberty. We did a lot of buying in antique markets. We were always going off and just finding odd things.

Sometimes I can't go into a shop without thinking, "Oh, that's a bit *Silo*." It was so ingrained into my eyeballs, the whole look of *Silo* – weird cups or bowls, or old bits of metal. I can't go anywhere without thinking, "That would look good in the silo!" It's really still a bit of a problem!

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

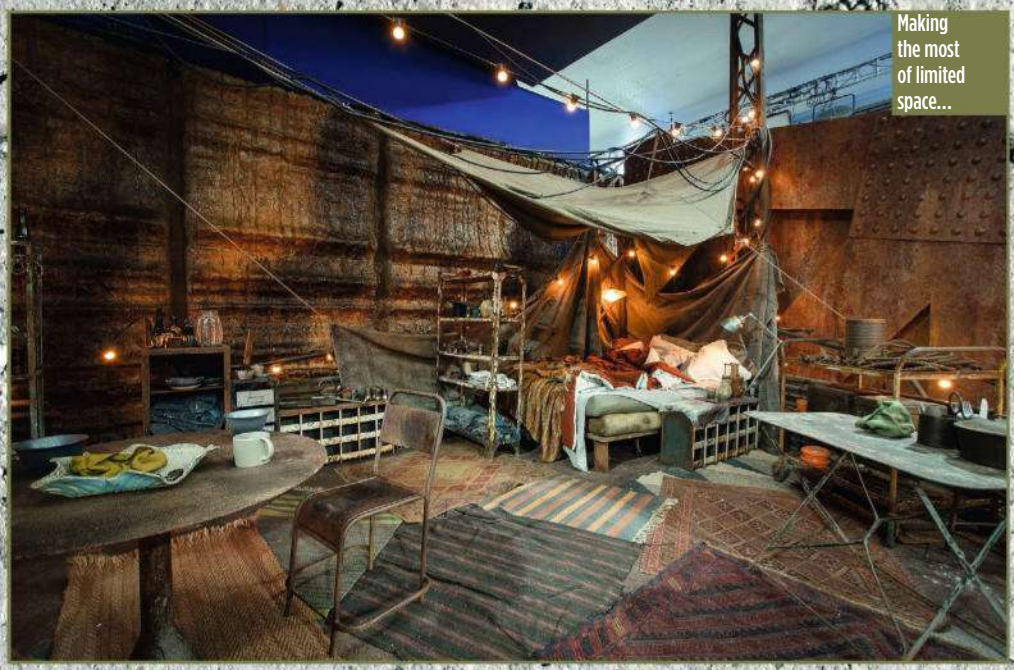
GB: Reading the scripts, there was going to be a balcony every 30 feet, and there would be two or three levels within that. Everybody was quite keen from the beginning that we would, as the art departments, provide two levels, so you could bring an actor from one level down the staircase fully onto the next level.

It didn't take a lot of geometry to work out that with 30 feet plus six feet off the ground

One physical staircase can easily be composited.

A physical model showing how the levels fit.

The wonders of bluescreen extend the environment.



Making the most of limited space...

Very precise camera control is needed for compositing.

for bluescreen, plus the distance above that for more bluescreen, we needed a stage about 45 feet high. We found an industrial space in North London, but it was tricky because those places don't have grids. They're not film studios. They're just an empty box.

It was mainly one staircase in the show. But we were very clever. With the cafeteria set, the entrance went onto the shaft. I realised that I could fit in part of the staircase on the same stage, so you could walk out of the cafeteria, across the walkway, onto the stairs.

So we did have that little section of staircase physically connected to the cafeteria set, but mainly surrounded by bluescreen. Once you got outside of the cafeteria, it was just the walkway going out to this section of the staircase, which was about 20 feet high, so people could go up the stairs and disappear behind the shaft. So we did have another section of staircase.

Ideally it would have been nice to have two silo shaft sets. When we went to the bottom level, where the big fans were, we completely redressed the whole stage and put lots of graffiti and aged materials. That was a big turnaround – it took three weeks to do that.

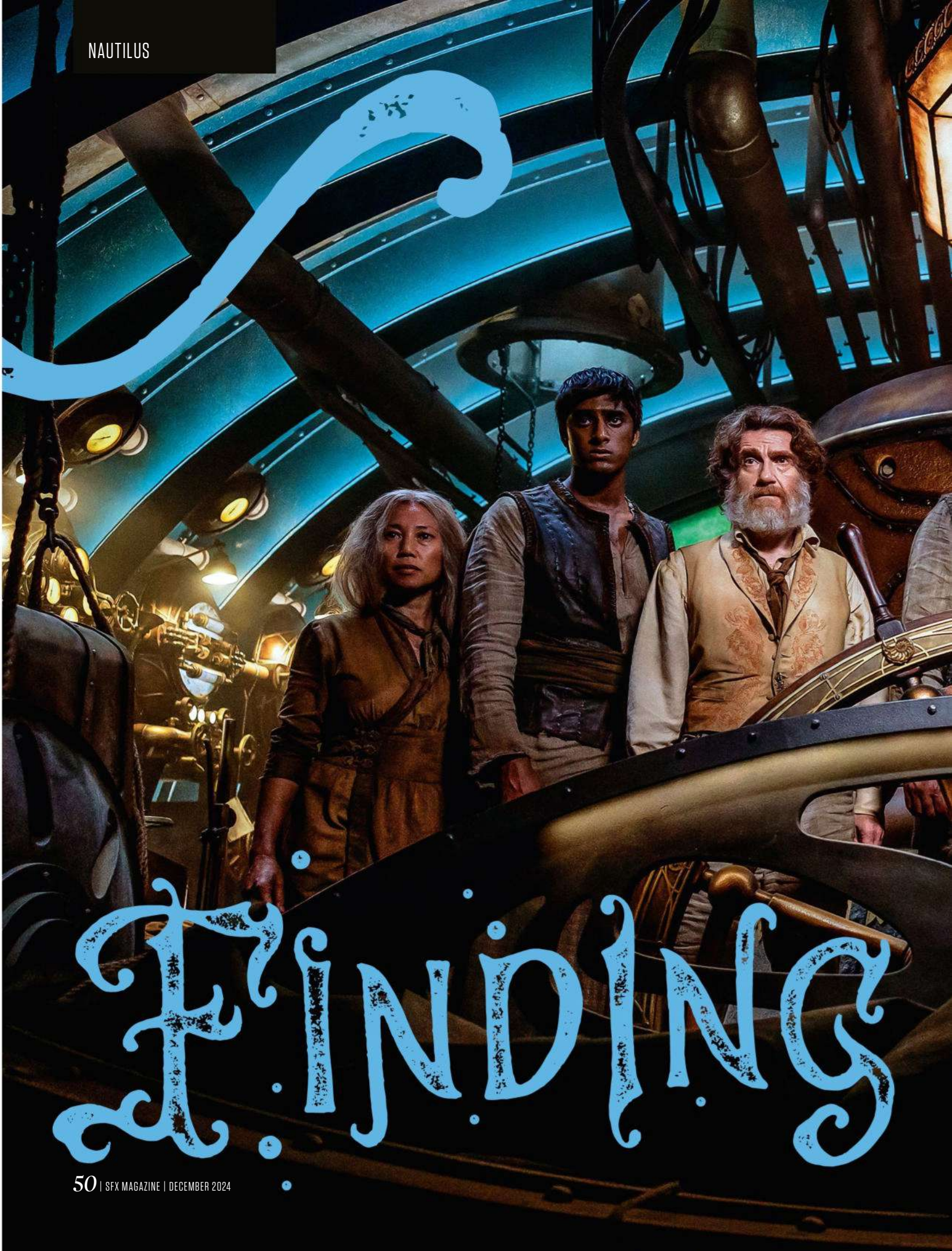
I spent weeks going over my models and the stage plan to get every square inch of that set ready, health and safety-wise, to make it suitable and accessible. I knew I had to really squeeze everything. I'm really pleased about the whole set, because with the visual effects added it does have a pretty extraordinary feel.

FEELS LIKE HOME

AB: I took Rebecca Ferguson to see Juliette's childhood home, because she doesn't get to act in it – everyone's died or moved on by the time Juliette's grown up – and she wanted to see her childhood room and toys. She hugged me and cried and said, "This is the most beautiful set I've ever been on, and it's the best-dressed set I've ever seen."

I was completely blown away. No one's ever been that nice, especially an A-list star. It was a fabulous show, we were all in it together. You would say goodbye to everyone, from the security guard to the special effects guys. I think it's honestly the most special show I've ever worked on.

Silo is on Apple TV+.



FINDING

Nemo

THE UNCHARTED HISTORY OF CAPTAIN NEMO RISES TO THE SURFACE IN NAUTILUS

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

PICTURES© VINCE VALITUTTI/DISNEY+, STOCK ELEMENTS: CHANNARONGSOS, MAGICPICS/GETTY

IF ALL YOU KNOW OF CAPTAIN NEMO is James Mason's suave submariner in 1954 Disney classic *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, think again. In fact, prepare to take the deepest of dives into a man so thoroughly mysterious that even his name means "nobody".

"We're basically trying to do the origin story," says producer Xavier Marchand of *Nautilus*, a new 10-part series that returns Jules Verne's enigmatic hero to the screen. "I always thought it would make a great, cracking adventure story for the entire family."

"It just felt like a really cool, unique take on how did that character and the Nautilus come to be," adds Michael Matthews, director of the first four episodes. "Then there's all the Jules Verne worldbuilding opportunities.

"You're in the 1800s and you're blending history and the reality at the time with these more fantastical science fiction ideas. It was really exciting."

We live in an age where IP is king. From Marvel to *Star Wars*, John Wick to Jack Reacher, those jealously prized Intellectual Properties power the modern entertainment industry. But IP is nothing new. Pioneering French fantasist Jules Verne gifted the world Captain Nemo in 1870's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Seas* – yes, *Seas*, plural; turns out *Sea* was the result of a botched English translation – and brought him back five years later in *The Mysterious Island*. Verne even revived the character for 1882 stage play *Journey Through The Impossible*.

A scientific visionary and champion of the oppressed, roaming the uncharted oceans in his phenomenally advanced submarine Nautilus, Nemo has endured in no less than three centuries now. He's spawned countless film and TV adaptations – everyone from Michael Caine to Patrick Stewart has played him – along with books, graphic novels, cartoons and even pop songs ("Left me all alone/Nemo's going home" warbled Sarah Brightman on her 1993 album *Dive*). *Nautilus*, created by *Beowulf: Return To The Shieldlands*' Jamie Dormer, builds a backstory from hints found in Verne's original fiction.

"In *The Mysterious Island*, Nemo is hiding under a volcano in the Nautilus, and he tells his life story as he's dying," says Marchand. "In his life story he's not James Mason! It's a two or three page monologue and a lot of what we have in the series is there. Nemo's an Indian prince, educated in England. The British East India Company took over his lands."

"The British East India Company is the big mastermind of the world and the power of the time," adds Matthews. "This underdog team rises through the series, these misfits that steal the Nautilus while they're trying to build it in this penal colony in India, and then they're on the run from the company.

"We start with Nemo as a prisoner, that we don't know anything about and we don't

Shazad Latif as the flowing-locked Nemo (centre).

Richard E Grant doing his thing as the Rajah.

Blaster (Kayden Price) and Humility (Georgia Flood).

Nemo has a run-in with the Rajah. Uh oh.

understand where he's from. He's just with this group. Then we build his story through the series, being on the run. It almost turns into a revenge story, but then it becomes more about how these different characters come together and belong in this world. They're all from different walks of life and different places."

As Marchand tells *SFX*, this fathom-plunging prequel is "really rooted in Verne", combining elements of both books. "In *Twenty Thousand Leagues* it's explained how he's become this misanthrope, and is a really angry person against the human race.

"He builds the Nautilus to be away from the human race and just live under the sea. The Nemo of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* wants to harvest seagrass and live in a sustainable world, which is very of today, right?

> **"Apart from creative licences we've really strived to be authentic to the spirit of Verne"**

"There are lots of clues in *The Mysterious Island* for the origin story of Nemo. Then we've taken some of the big sequences from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Seas*, like Atlantis and the squid battle. There's an Easter egg for those who watch the show carefully in that we visit the Mysterious Island at some point.

"The design of the Nautilus we tried to extrapolate from what's in the book. Apart from a few creative licences we've really strived to be authentic to the spirit of Verne."

"Just how does this character come to be?" asks Matthews, whose calling card was 2020's *Love And Monsters* – a film that impressed the producers of *Nautilus* with its blend of imaginative CG spectacle and mischievous, adventurous tone.

"Slowly, over time, he becomes that person that we know, and that's quite an outcast, and quite a sophisticated, educated, interesting individual, with this group of people, all living on the ship. He's kind of created his own world. What's the potential arc? Knowing the seeds of where he came from, how would he become that guy?

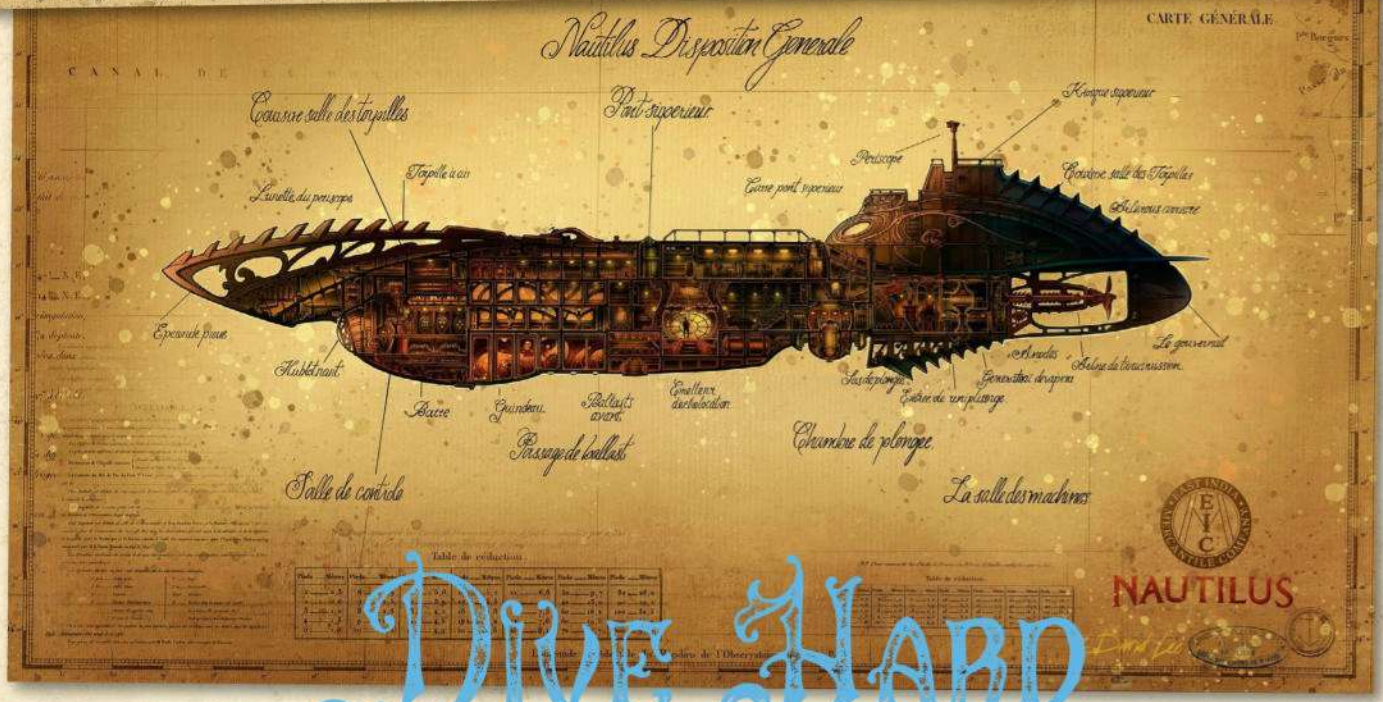
"He's quite closed, quite guarded. He often makes choices that we don't completely understand as we're going through the story, against the team. He doesn't become this leader. He's someone that no one can work out, the audience as well.

"You think you're getting an understanding – oh, he's actually helping everyone! – and then you go no, he's actually doing his own thing. He's one of the things you're trying to work out through the series. What is he really trying to do? Does he actually care about these people he's dragged with him, that we're starting to care about, or is it just about his own priorities? He's the central mystery you're trying to figure out."

If Nemo retains his inscrutable edge it's up to the supporting characters to illuminate him. Humility Lucas, played by *Anzac Girls*' Georgia Flood, is a Nautilus passenger, albeit one who's nowhere to be found in Verne.

"In the original book it's Aronnax and Conseil who are brought on board after the wreck of their ship," says Marchand. 'We thought it would be interesting to have women onboard. It creates an homage to films like *The African Queen*, where you have an inherent tension between the two main protagonists. You have someone who can interrogate and confront Nemo, and not necessarily be part of the chain of command.

"Humility is an engineer by trade. Her father was an engineer and she wanted to become an →



Dive Hard

Designing the Nautilus

"We tried not to go too steampunk," says producer Xavier Marchand of bringing Nemo's magnificent vessel to the screen. "We were very lucky with our fantastic production designer, David Lee.

"We wanted something that was maybe more hydrodynamic than the one in the 1954 film. We wanted it to be quite modern, in a way. We were trying to be scientific about it. I actually went to see a submarine engineer at UCL and ran everything by him. He said, 'Well, this is great, but your submarine has so many giant spaces inside you would need to have huge ballast for it to go underwater!'

"When we made the show in Australia, we actually built a lot of the Nautilus at scale. The main set was 37m long, which was the control room, the main space. We had the diving chamber and we had another set for the torpedo room and then another massive set for the engine room. It ended up being a big old thing!"

"It was incredible," director Michael Matthews tells *SFX*. "They built the whole inside of the ship, pretty much. It was an incredible physical build, so we could go through the ship. The control room was on a gimbal, so it could actually move.

"Because of the Victorian style and the technology of the time, although it's still modern and sophisticated in the concepts you're still going with the technologies that they had and the techniques they would have used to build it. We tried to keep all those limitations, so it has a clunkiness and a tactility and a realness, but it's a bit more forward-thinking in terms of imagining 'If they'd understood this about engineering...'

"Everything works! Our crew had to go in and have training in the control room because this lever did this, this one did that. It was really cool understanding the basic engineering ideas for how the sequences would go. It had been really well thought-out about how the ship would work."

As Jules Verne himself described the Nautilus, "a masterpiece containing masterpieces."

ARTWORK BY DAVID LEE

All aboard the Nautilus! Next stop: the mazey deeps.

Edward (Benedict Hardie, right): whoops.

engineer but obviously as a woman it's difficult. She has to pretend to be a boy to go to engineer's school."

"She's taken hostage early on because Nemo feels bad about leaving her at sea," says Matthews. "But he pretty much hates the British, and their privilege, and how he himself has been looked down on, and so he's just pushing her away the whole time.

"She, equally, is not interested in this kind of pirate who's got this other agenda that she doesn't understand. As they're going through that push and pull they start finding a mutual respect for each other.

"She's kind of on the run in her own personal way. We perceive her in a wealthy British way in the beginning, but she's got her own story that's not necessarily what we assumed when we met her. She's also running away from not fitting into that society, and is trying to figure out her own part in the world, similar to Nemo."

Nemo himself is played by Shazad Latif. As Marchand reveals, the *Star Trek: Discovery* star

> **"They're travelogues, in a way. It's like a giant 10-episode movie"**

was their first choice to command the Nautilus. "[Producer] Anand Tucker knows Shazad really well, and from the get-go he said, 'I've got the perfect Nemo.' So we met Shazad and were all, 'Oh my god, it's got to be him!' Disney loved Shazad but said, 'This is such a big property and IP – we need to see who else is out there.'

"We were like, 'But why? We've got Shazad – he's British-Indian, he's tall, he's handsome, he's smart, and he really wants to do the part.' So we threw this massive casting net around the world but in a way it showed that Shazad was the right guy for the role."

"He's awesome," adds Matthews. "He has a real weight and mystery to him. He holds that space in a really cool way. Like Xavier says, we did a huge casting, trying to see people from India, from America, everywhere around the world.

"There were literally hundreds of Nemos that we saw, and ultimately we came back round to Shazad as the guy, and he did such a great job. As Nemo he's quite hard and difficult to read. He doesn't give a lot. But then there's a vulnerability and glimmers of warmth and what's deeper in there." "He's very funny as well," notes Marchand.

Humility isn't having any of your nonsense.

"There's a lot of humour in the show, which he plays."

Filmed on Australia's Gold Coast, the 10-part series chases the breezy, swashbuckling vibe of modern blockbusters. "Tonally it's definitely a family adventure," says Matthews. "There's an Indiana Jones/*Pirates Of The Caribbean* tone, so it keeps moving, it keeps progressing forward. It's very alive.

"It's episodic in that there's a new world we'll open up, like the island, and a problem there. We have to survive that. Or frozen Atlantic icescapes, and getting stuck there. Also just deep underwater [adventures], like the Atlantis episode. You're never sitting in the same place, because they're always on the run, but then something else, whether a creature or a community or a concept, opens up.

"So although it's one linear story it is very episodic in terms of trying to have cliffhangers and 'Here's this new thing we'll get into in the next episode.' There's definitely a fun adventure cliffhanger tone to it."

But Nemo has an overriding objective, one that neither passengers or viewers are necessarily onboard with.

"It's always been the challenge of adapting Verne, because they're extraordinary journeys," says Marchand of balancing the show's arc with individual voyages.

"They're travelogues, in a way. So here it's a giant 10-episode movie, if you want. Each episode is a mini-adventure in itself but it's the same story. What we've tried to do is make each episode a sort of mini-genre. So there's a more confined horror episode, a Viking episode...

"Essentially Nemo has been saying to everyone, 'We're going to go and find the treasure.' In the Verne book it's the treasure of Vigo, which is outside Portugal, but we've decided to do the treasure of a Viking queen, buried in the Northern sea.

"Nemo says, 'We're going to split the treasure and then we can all be free.' In fact he has his own agenda once he gets the treasure, and that's revealed later on, after multiple adventures.

"We basically follow two sets of characters. The Nautilus crew are being pursued by the East India Company dreadnought, so we have our arch villain. You go back and forth between these two worlds. You get to understand that one of the guys hunting Nemo has got a personal grudge."

Essential to the entire series, of course, is the underwater world, a boundless, unconquered realm every bit as beautiful as it's perilous. *Nautilus* takes inspiration from the evocative original illustrations by Alphonse de Neuville and Édouard Riou.

"I think I was a bit of the Verne bore on the production," smiles Marchand, "but if you look at the original black and white pictures from the book, that's the world that we wanted to create. They're very special, especially the undersea ones. You'll see that our squid sequence is very, very impressive and realistic!"

"It's almost where we open up the fantasy of it more," says Matthews of the show's submerged universe, "because we're in a time when no one's gone underwater. It's this unknown, uncharted place.

"Even the first time the Nautilus goes underwater, it's not completely finished, so it's never been tested. People don't know what they're going to find if they go deeper. It's like an uncharted area of the map.

"So there's a wonder with that, and a lot of incredible nature. That's a big part of the show, going 'Look at this incredible natural world we don't understand anything about.' There's the unknown, encountering different sea creatures.

"We have this ragtag crew of prisoners who are trying to survive and getting things wrong and being in predicaments deep underwater in a submarine that's got problems. They don't know exactly what they're doing down there. There's a life to it and a beauty and an awe and there's also the danger."

Nautilus is on Prime Video now.

Messy: Sue Johnston as Cecily in *Generation Z*.

Talkin' 'Bout My Generation

JAY LYCURGO ON *TITANS*, FANDOM AND A NEW GENERATION OF ZOMBIES WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

SFX IS DEEP IN GEEK conversation with Jay Lycurgo, the young British actor who's making a name for himself on several high-profile genre shows. Before all that, he'd already dabbled with pop culture icons with his early role as a non-speaking "Train gang" member in *The Batman*, filmed in 2020. A role in a Hollywood movie took some adjusting to for the then 22-year-old, following the "few little things" he'd filmed up to that point, including an episode of daytime soap *Doctors*.

"I didn't really know much about the industry, so everything was quite overwhelming," he recalls. "I just felt so stiff. You have to get a good enough experience to start feeling really comfortable. Still, to this day, you find your struggles with it.

"But at the beginning, you can't really prepare yourself. Even drama school can't prepare you for something that is forever changing; that being a film set. You just have to go in guns blazing and hope you're doing a good job. But that's why the director is there!

"It was a great experience looking back," he adds, "and it feels like it was the start of something." Indeed, since landing his breakthrough role as Tim Drake in the third and fourth seasons of *Titans*, he's been working non-stop.

LITTLE BIRD

Lycurgo says he was always more of a superheroes "cartoon guy" until he was cast in the DC series, when he "started reading all the comics. I've actually got them laid out in my apartment now, which is really fun. Nice memorabilia."

Asked how he dealt with his newfound fame, he reflects upon the response to his casting by a certain sub-section of fans. "Tim, in the comics, is white Asian, so for me to be mixed race there were definitely comments," he says. "But I've always said that people are really passionate about things that they care about. I'm a big football fan, you see how toxic it can be for those fans and the players that have to deal →

PICTURES: JAMES PARDON/CHANNEL 4

It's all fun and games until the biting starts.

with it. I'm pretty comfortable with it. I'm at a nice stage now that people can come up to me and talk to me. Even at that time, there wasn't anything that was *too* intense. It's just knowing when to fight your battles and just make sure that you keep your privacy to yourself, but also to be a nice person."

Drake, aka Batman's sidekick Robin, would come out as bisexual in the *Batman* comic. "When I saw the Tim and Bernard relationship and Greg [Berlanti, *Titans* co-creator] told me we're going to do this storyline, I said, 'Great, yes. You need more representation, and I would love to do it.' But let's be respectful and let's make sure it's accurate."

The reaction has *almost* been entirely positive. "People are going to say things," he remarks, despondently. "That's what social media is there for. People think they can say anything and get away with it and whatever." Happily, those were the extreme cases, with most fans being "so lovely to me, man – they really liked what I did with Tim, and I'm so happy that it worked out."

Dancing With The Devil

Jay Lycurgo reflects on his Netflix drama

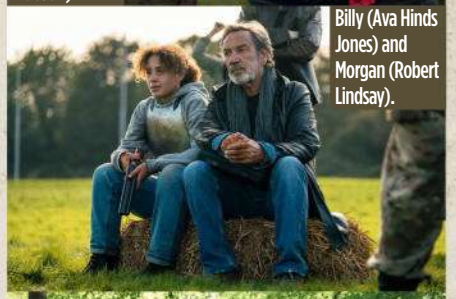
In *The Bastard Son & The Devil Himself*, Lycurgo played the eponymous bastard son, Nathan. "It taught me a lot," he says of the Netflix fantasy series, cancelled after a single season. "I actually went to a restaurant yesterday and there was a woman working there and she said, 'I feel like I know you from somewhere. Oh my god, *Bastard Son*!'

"Every single tweet, every person who comes up to me talking about *Bastard Son* says 'I don't know how that got cancelled, it was so good, and the cliffhanger was amazing'. "I'm like, 'Well, yeah.' The stories are so great. I guess that's all we can do. I was so upset when we got cancelled. Sometimes it's just out of your control. But it's an incredible memory that I'll never forget.

"It was my first lead role, and we all still chat, so I have a lot of love for it, and that will never change. It will always be in my heart. I would love to bring it back one day."

© NETFLIX

Frank (Paul Bentall) and Janine (Anita Dobson).


Billy (Ava Hinds Jones) and Morgan (Robert Lindsay).

Finn (Viola Prettejohn) looks down on you.

Lycurgo would be open to reprising the role and may well have done so had there been another season. "But as soon as we saw that [DC co-CEO] James Gunn was getting rid of the Rock [star of *Black Adam*] and Henry Cavill [who played Superman], then I was like, 'Well, they're gonna get rid of us,'" he laughs. "It was like 'Okay, see you later!' But I was fine about it. It's what it is. That happens.

"But I also feel like the show had a nice ending and another season wasn't necessarily needed."

DEAD AND LOVING IT

It's a busy month for the actor. His horror-comedy film *The Radleys* is now on Sky Cinema, and his new television series *Generation Z* is launching on Channel 4.

The six-part zombie satire – which he describes as "a bonkers, funny, grounded British genre show" – kicks off with an overturned lorry leaking chemical gas near a retirement home, creating "these cannibal-like zombies out of old people, and they cause absolute havoc".

Heavily made-up as two of the infected pensioners are British television legends Anita Dobson and Sue Johnston. "They're just brilliant," Lycurgo says. "The great thing is that they both just have, still, such youthful energy that's so refreshing.

"I remember every time Anita would come on set, she was just dancing. She had no choice because I always had my speaker, especially when I start playing Queen. That was a test, being like, 'Let's see if it gets awkward' – but she loves it! She's super-lovely."

What makes the series stand out from the crowd is that its particular brand of zombies are not so much living dead as living *alive*. The pensioners infected with the virus undergo complete cellular regeneration, finding themselves blessed with massively increased strength and vigour, which gives rise to woodland raves and Johnston's character, Cecely, cartwheeling energetically around her care home.

"Everyone is going through the same thing emotionally," Lycurgo explains. "Once they're zombies, it's not like they're clueless, they have their own things that they're trying to fight. It's the same with the kids as well, when you meet them," he adds, referring to those caught up in their grandparents' carnage. Did we mention the pensioners have also developed a violent taste for human flesh? All in all, they're having the time of their lives.

"It's not just zombie this, zombie that, you've still got to deal with their relationships and the family dynamics around them. We're not just going for a zombie flick; there's a lot more depth. The zombies still have a human nature about them so you're getting a lot more opinions from both sides."

An initial attraction to the series for zombie show fan Lycurgo was the opportunity to work with creator and director Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*, *In The Earth*). "I had heard a lot about how brilliant he was," he says, maintaining that "being part of a Ben Wheatley project is a huge deal".

"He was so different and authentic. He's a very chilled dude as well, he really trusts your instincts and he allowed us to be very playful. He made us improv quite a bit, especially at the beginning of the process.

"He wouldn't mind if I said this, but I think he's an absolute nerd – in the best way possible! I love nerds. I love people that are passionate. I love people that are authentic and have their own vision."

With an increasing number of genre productions under his belt – also including *War Of The Worlds* – he happily embraces his own inner geek, with WWE particularly floating his boat. "I actually watched the [former professional wrestling promoter] Vince McMahon documentary [on Netflix] recently. That's *my* niche."

Further evidence of Lycurgo's nerd credentials slip out after *SFX* suggests he would make a good lead in *Doctor Who*.

"I appreciate that, man; that's a huge compliment. David Tennant was my Doctor Who and I remember when he had to regenerate, I went downstairs to my mum, and I was like" – he puts on a distraught voice – "'He's gone!'

"I remember, when I was 11, it was my mum and dad's wedding vows, and I turned up in a grey suit with white Converse and a sonic screwdriver in my pocket. So I would love to play Doctor Who one day – if it makes sense."

> **"It's not just zombie this, zombie that, you've still got to deal with their relationships"**

Next up is a part in the *Peaky Blinders* movie. Reflecting on his swift rise from supporting to leading roles, Lycurgo says that sometimes, with his personal life getting so hectic, he can forget to take in and appreciate everything he has achieved.

"There's still such a long way to go as well," he adds. "I guess the thing with ambition is that it never turns off, so you can kind of be hard on yourself about what you're trying to achieve. Goals become a lot more specific.

"My mum was saying to me yesterday, 'Can you imagine the boy who was in *Doctors*, what he would say to what you've achieved right now?' I was like, 'Yeah, I think he would be pretty shocked.'

"You have to be grounded in this industry," he continues. "There's so much out of your control. So maybe I'm a bit more cynical these days. But yeah, I'm totally amazed about what's gone on and all the connections and friends that I've made from it."

So once touted as a star of tomorrow, Lycurgo has gone on to become a shining star of today.

Generation Z is on Channel 4 now.

Jane (Rebecca Humphries) is having a real *day*.

Janine's just got to pop out for a few bits...

STARFLEET

LOWER DECKS CREATOR MIKE MCMAHAN EXPLAINS HOW HE WENT ABOUT CHARTING A LAST SERIES OF ADVENTURES FOR THE USS CERRITOS

DECOMMISSION

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Eugene Cordero as Rutherford and Tawny Newsome as Mariner.

LET'S BE REAL: *STAR TREK* FANS raised on *The Original Series*, or *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, have had no qualms, over the last decade, about talking trash about the latest *Trek* streaming shows.

But there's been one show mostly spared, and that's *Star Trek: Lower Decks* which, after a slightly bumpy first season, has become one of the best reviewed and cross-generationally appreciated *Trek* shows because of its unabashed adoration for every iteration of the universe's canon.

Created by Mike McMahan and launched in 2020, *Lower Decks* is only the second animated *Trek* show, taking the very dusty baton from 1973's *The Animated Series*.

Featuring an original crew on an original ship, the USS Cerritos, it's most interested in shining a light on the ensign crew members working their way up the ranks of Starfleet by doing all the menial jobs every other show and film ignored.

After four seasons of bizarre and hilarious adventures across the universe, the core team have proved themselves worthy, with recent promotions to Lieutenants Junior Grade for Mariner (Tawny Newsome), Boimler (Jack Quaid), Rutherford (Eugene Cordero) and Tendi (Noël Wells).

The show has found its lane, mixing audacious contemporary comedy stylings with *Trek* references so deep that even the most knowledgeable fans sometimes need to double-check their official universe encyclopedias. That hardcore geekiness quickly earned McMahan and his writers respect and appreciation for their ability to poke fun at *Trek* as insiders.

But nothing in streaming lasts forever, and *Lower Decks* is taking its last tour with 10 episodes before it gets decommissioned. McMahan tells *SFX* that the decision makers told him way in advance of writing season five that this would be their opportunity to wrap up the show with some closure.

Ransom and Boimler: "Just joshin', bro!"

D'Vana Tendi (voiced by Noël Wells) is back on board.

SQUAD GOALS

"It was really messaged to me as, 'Wow, you get a fifth season. Isn't this great? It's pretty rare in streaming to get that far,'" McMahan says, recalling when he was told of the cancellation. "Which is true, but I would say with everything being as it is in the industry these days, I didn't really change too much what I wanted to do in season five to make it feel like we were jumping ahead, or solving some big puzzle.

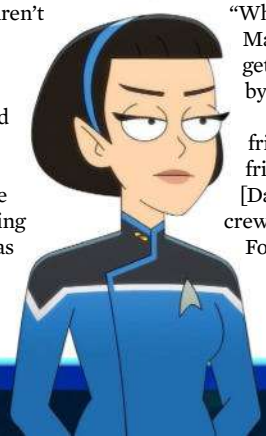
"For me, the the show is designed so that it can run hundreds of episodes. You'll see in season five that there are concepts introduced that I would joyfully explore for many more seasons. So what I didn't want to do is accelerate or artificially button something up that would feel jarring," he continues. "Instead, I kind of kept going with the plan that I had and just accelerated some things so that if we never get to do *Lower Decks* again after this, it does feel like not only the end of a chapter, but also a celebration of what made the show so fun while we got to do it."

The first two episodes, "Dos Cerritos" and "Shades Of Green", worked two-fold to set up the main paths of the season, exploring how the "deckers" are faring with having more responsibility, and dealing with the ongoing repercussions of a quantum fissure that the Cerritos travelled into (meeting their mirror crew on the other side), and then tried to repair, with iffy results.

"The flavour of the season involving the multiverse, and our crew's low-rent, not important job of showing up after something has happened with a multiversal portal and fixing it – that was partially me wanting to do a thing where the multiverse is so unimpressive," McMahan laughs.

"Because I'd worked on *Rick And Morty* so long, I think the multiverse has been examined by a lot of popular media, so it was mythologically accessible for us to have Boimler or Mariner go, 'Oh, great. Another interdimensional portal.' They aren't blown away by the concept.

"But it did also give us the ability to pull in some legacy characters who otherwise would have died of old age, or would have been in the timeline and inaccessible to us," he adds. "I've been trying to figure out a unifying way to be able to access people as a surprise, and we did it. You're going to get some pretty cool legacy folks coming in that we had a blast with."



Garrett Wang's Harry Kim is one character we can expect to see. McMahan stresses that "shoving my hands into the legacy character bin and grabbing as many as I could" only came about as this was the last series, though. "Usually, I'm very careful that we better not have too many legacy people, and it better really organically make sense." He promises the Cerritos was his priority to the very end.

Speaking of his core cast, McMahan says that despite most comedies looking for ways to keep their characters from growing too much, he and his writers wanted to explore what effect maturity would have on their team.

"Mariner's story last season was such a big explosion of emotion and growth," he says. "What's exciting for me about that is that Mariner, coming into the season, just gets to be herself and not be burdened by that stuff.

"It's getting to see Mariner and her friendship with Boimler, and her friendship with Captain Freeman [Dawnn Lewis] and being a part of the crew, and not being against the crew."

For Boimler, meeting his much more

PICTURES: CBS STUDIOS/PARAMOUNT+, STOCK ELEMENTS: SEAMARTINI/GETTY

Mariner does not appreciate being pointed at.

Tendi and Rutherford: not good at selfies.

Jack Quaid voices Boimler (right).

A TOS DEEP CUT

McMahan promises a throwback to the '60s show

"You will get to meet a new character. It was really surprising to me when my writers were pitching it," he teases. "We needed a character for a bit of a mystery episode and they pitched a species that I don't think has been brought back since TOS. We made them a new Ensign, and they worked so well that I was like, 'I could write so many stories with this character.' I hope people like them as much as I do, because I'm so enamoured with them."

successful mirror version in the premiere has set him on a weird aspirational journey to best himself. "Boimler's season is a lot about how he starts copying his own actions from a data pad that he swiped from that guy in a different dimension," McMahan says.

"Is that good? Is that bad? Is it embarrassing to crib from your better self? Or should you come about it naturally? There's a lot of funny stuff that comes from that because at the end, you're rooting for Boimler either way."

Science Officer Tendi has returned to the Cerritos after some piratical adventures on her home world of Orion. "Tendi this season is interesting, because we kind of resolved 'Am I Orion or am I Starfleet?' Now she just gets to be both," he explains.

"She gets to choose when she's gonna lean into how she defines herself. But the confidence of that is always one step forward, two steps back. You'll see that she's now in competition with T'Lyn [Gabrielle Ruiz] across the season. What happens when you and your pal really believe in each other but are gunning for the same job? Does that cause a little bit of friction?"

FINAL CURTAIN

Last but not least, McMahan says that Rutherford is one of the characters that is most affected by the show ending, due to a slightly truncated arc. "Rutherford and Tendi, I love that they seem to have an emotional relationship and friendship due to their passion about the science and the engineering of stuff," he says.

"But when does your sense of self have to separate from your work and your hobbies and your interests? Rutherford is a physical representation of that. Seeing him grapple with that across the season is interesting."

While there wasn't enough story time left to give every single character on the Cerritos a spotlight in which to shine, McMahan says they tried to give audiences a lot of satisfying moments. "Captain Freeman gets to do something really cool this year that I'm excited for people to see," he teases. "I think Ransom [Jerry O'Connell] has arced out in a really nice way. He started off as such a bro douche and he's really proven that you can't judge somebody off of your first instincts. He gets a couple of really, really sweet moments this season that proves he's somebody you can trust. And Dr Migleemo [Paul F Tompkins] has a funny episode this season."

As we roll towards the end of our interview, McMahan gets a bit wistful as he speaks so enthusiastically about the show which he and his cast and crew have technically been mourning for a year. It's just now that they're getting to share it with their audience.

"It feels like the ship has more to explore, like we haven't seen all of the Cerritos," he says of stories untold. "We haven't even seen everything the Cerritos has the functionality to do. At the end of the day, like all of that texture and all of that depth and all of that opportunity, the downside is that in five seasons, you don't get to explore and explain every piece of it.

"But the upside is you also don't have it all explained to you. I like the idea that this feels like a living, breathing world we could just keep exploring forever and keep laughing with."

He made sure the *Lower Decks* finale was able to live up to some of his personal

> **"I didn't want to accelerate or artificially button something up"**

favourites in the *Star Trek* pantheon. "For me, the finale needed to be a celebration of the ship, a celebration of the season and a celebration of the series," he says. "It also has to be surprising. It should feel like, 'Oh, of course, everything led to this.'

"The finale has a whole extra act, an entire additional eight minutes – which doesn't sound like a lot, but it is. I don't know anybody on the crew, or anybody I've shown the finale to, where the last eight minutes doesn't make them tear up a little."

Asked if he's laid out any pitches to the higher-ups for *Lower Decks* spin-offs or movie-length specials, McMahan laughs and says that would not have been appreciated. "This is the end," he confirms. "I've seen people online asking, 'Oh, I wonder if this is a meta prank, and they're going to do *Star Trek: The Middle Decks*?'

"I chuckled, because I would love that to be the case. But this is the end of a very awesome, cool thing. If it comes back, I would love that. Or if this is what we did, I also just love it. In 50 episodes, I don't think we had a single stinker. I'm really, really happy with season five. It's exactly the season I wanted to make."

Star Trek: Lower Decks is on Paramount+.

THE UNBEARABLE DARKNESS OF BEING HUMAN

IN THE SECOND PART OF OUR EXCLUSIVE BEHIND-THE-SCENES FEATURE, SHOWRUNNER TOBY WHITHOUSE AND VAMPIRE HAL ACTOR DAMIEN MOLONY LOOK BACK AT THE MAKING OF THE FINAL TWO SERIES, THE BIG CAST CHANGES, THE SPIN-OFF AND THE IDEAS THAT NEVER MADE IT TO SCREEN

WORDS: **DAVE GOLDER**

SERIES TWO OF *BEING HUMAN* climaxed with the notorious Box Tunnel massacre. Over the series three finale and series four premiere, viewers witnessed a massacre of a different kind, however. Three of the show's lead characters – Mitchell (Aidan Turner), George (Russell Tovey) and Nina (Sinead Keenan) – were killed off in a series of body blows that would have been the death knell for most series.

But *Being Human* was a show about picking yourself up after death and just getting on with it. "As I recall, all of those decisions were made early enough in the storyline in process that it didn't have too much of an impact," says showrunner Toby Whithouse.

"We knew, obviously, that Aidan had gone. Russell had said he only wanted to do one episode more. I think for both Russell and Sinead there was just a sense of that original grouping had been broken apart, and so the show would then become something different.

"That sense of family, and that connection that those characters had – and that the audience responded so positively to – came out of genuine love and affection between those actors. So consequently, when one of them →

STOCK ART ELEMENTS: GETTY

PICTURES © BBC/TOUCHPAPER. PORTRAITS BY STEVE BROWN

> **“We were given enormous freedom and latitude to do the show that we wanted to do”**

goes, that dynamic is going to change. Also, these are extraordinary actors. They’re just not going to stay around forever. I wasn’t offended by their decision. It was more, I would say, parting in sorrow than in anger.”

With Annie (Lenora Crichlow) leaving at the end of series four too, the show went from having Mitchell, George and Annie as the central triumvirate to Hal (Damien Molony), Tom (Michael Socha) and Alex (Kate Bracken) in the space of one turbulent season. The key to making the new trio a success, Whithouse believes, was making sure all three were a contrast to their predecessors.

“If you’re going to replace Aidan Turner, it would be madness to have another brooding, sexy, primal character. With the werewolf we didn’t want somebody who’s fastidious and anal like George. We kind of swapped them around so that Tom is the feral one and Hal was the meticulous one.”

It was young Irish actor Damien Molony, in his first TV role, who was cast as Hal, a 500-year-old vampire trying to give up drinking blood through various near-OCD coping mechanisms. “I remember auditioning and just thinking, ‘I want to play this guy like Alan Rickman as the Sheriff of Nottingham,’ recalls Molony. “With a sense of great insecurity, but also real swagger.”

Playing addiction also appealed to him. While he went back and watched Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee films in preparation for the role (“Hal was an Old One, and an old character, so we didn’t want to go down the *Twilight* route”), he also took inspiration from James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, a fictionalised account of addiction recovery.

Molony thinks another little detail may have helped him in the audition: “I was doing the play *’Tis Pity She’s A Whore* up in Leeds, my very first ever job. Every night my character was covered in gallons of blood for the last scene. I don’t know if I had some blood under my fingernails from the night before, but it couldn’t have hurt my chances.”

Hal was a complex character, which required Molony to play both Good Hal and Bad Hal, and flesh out his history in various flashbacks. The director of Molony’s first two episodes, Philip John, gave him some musical guidance to help him differentiate the characters. “There was the mathematical precision of Johann Sebastian Bach for the buttoned-up, strait-laced Hal, and loud dangerous rock music for wild Hal.”

Annie (Lenora Crichlow) and Nina (Sinead Keenan).

George (Russell Tovey) briefly returned.

Tom (Michael Socha) gets some help from Nina.

Tom, Hal (Damien Molony) and Alex (Kate Bracken).

Molony is keen to emphasise “just how proud I am of the show and how much fun I had doing it,” and says one of his most fun moments was the song and dance routine for “Puttin’ On The Ritz” in the final ever episode.

“When I opened the script and it said Hal does this musical number – this is chef’s kiss, Toby, chef’s kiss. It had to be one take, so there was huge pressure on. I’d never done anything like that before, and yeah, happy memories and something to be proud of all of my life.”

Less fun was licking blood off a maggoty floor. “The smell of them, that was the worst part. But I’m told they’re incredibly clean.”

He also reveals that there were two types of fake blood. “The blood that dripped from our mouths was so delicious. It tasted almost like mint chocolate. But the blood we drank from wine glasses was always beetroot juice. I remember going for a wee the next day and thinking I had something wrong with my urine.”

The show continued successfully with its new leading actors for two more series before the BBC pulled the plug. Whithouse thinks it was the right time.

“I can’t really complain. We were given enormous freedom and latitude to do the show that we wanted to do. We were slightly a victim of our own success, because the whole point of BBC Three was that it was a platform for experimental shows, and by this point we’d

STOCK ART ELEMENTS: GETTY

A cameraman takes out one of the cast. (Not really.)

Annie and Alex practise their moody stares.

A real watercooler moment. With blood.

BEING TEENAGE

Teen wolf meets teen ghost and teen vampire in the webseries *Becoming Human*

Back in early 2011, as series three of *Being Human* was airing, the show also unleashed a spin-off in the form of the eight-episode webseries *Becoming Human*. Set in a school, it starred returning character Adam (Craig Roberts) as an uncouth 46-year-old vampire trapped in the hormonal body of a teenager, alongside stroppy werewolf Christa (Leila Mimmack) and a recently murdered ghost, Matt (Josh Brown). The series concentrated on the search for Matt's killer in five-to-10 minute bitesize chunks.

"I wanted to call it *The Naughty Step*," recalls Whithouse. "That was just met with a wall of indifference. The notion of online shows was very, very new at the time, to the point that when we were given the commission, we didn't really understand what that meant. To be fair, I don't think the BBC really did either.

"It felt like slightly kind of 'wild west' – a new kind of platform that was quite unexplored. So it was slightly more kind of experimental. We'll make it, we'll put it online, but there's no way of knowing if anyone's going to watch it. It felt like a bit of it was very much a kind of shot in the dark."

He admits there may have been another – typically BBC – reason why it was the *Being Human* team who were given the experiment. "By that point, we had become quite good at spreading a tiny budget. We knew by that point how to make a small budget work."

become sort of establishment. So it made perfect sense to end there. Also, we've all seen shows where they've just done one season too many. I'm really okay with us ending where we ended because you don't want to outstay your welcome."

If there had been a season six, Whithouse muses that he would have reintroduced Hetty, the potty-mouthed Old One in a little girl's body. "I would have had Hetty as one of the regulars because I just thought she was a funny character to write. But apart from that, there were never any other plans."

However if there had been a spin-off, he'd have liked to have explored Hal's time in the '50s further, revealing how the vampire met his Windrush generation mentor, werewolf Leo. "If I was going to do a film, that's the one I would like to have done, with Hal meeting Leo through the dog fights." (Actually, werewolf fights, in case your memory needs jogging.)

Whithouse had nothing to do with the US version of the show, though. "That was a pragmatic choice. We were still making the UK version at the time and so I didn't want to hold back on giving them ideas I was keeping for the UK show, or be giving them good ideas and later thinking, 'Bollocks, I should have saved that for the UK show'."

Both Molony and Whithouse have kept mementoes from the set. Molony has many of the dominos that Hal used to twiddle through his fingers, some fangs, a nice suit and one of the posters of evil future Hal (from series four episode "Making History"). "It's not hanging up, though, because it would be a very strange thing to have over the mantelpiece when people come over for dinner."

Whithouse has no such qualms. He has the Honolulu Heights pub sign that used to hang outside the main characters' Barry base over his mantelpiece. There are some *Being Human* memories he'd be happy to bury, though.

"Every show has a season where everything goes wrong. For us, it was season four. Michael Socha broke his leg, and that nearly destroyed the entire show because it was touch and go whether we'd get the insurance to cover the delay while he recovered. Then there were traces of asbestos found in one of the locations. By the time a runner had to be cut out of a vehicle by the fire brigade that was just another day at the office. That was the season built on an old Native American burial ground."

Being Human is on BBC iPlayer. Damien Molony will star as Bergerac in a UKTV remake of the BBC detective series, written by Toby Whithouse.

PICTURES BY HUW JOHN © BBC/TOUCHPAPER

AS **BLAKE'S 7** COMES TO BLU-RAY WE DISCOVER HOW THE BBC'S VERY OWN SPACE REBELLION BEGAN

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Blake's... six? Don't forget the computer, Zen!

I HAVE A FEELING *BLAKE'S 7* was a whole lot better and more important than those of us who were working on it realised, certainly when it started," reflects veteran director Michael E Briant. "I mean, we all knew it was rather good. It wasn't just any 13-part series. We all knew it had quality."

Welcome to the third century of the second calendar – or, rather more mundanely, the first week of January 1978. As *Star Wars* orbits the UK like some Odeon-conquering Death Star, the BBC is launching its own weekly counterstrike. Just like George Lucas's cinematic wonder, it's a tale of scrappy cosmic rebels battling totalitarian overlords. This war, however, is waged on an altogether smaller screen, on a very different budget to its Hollywood rival.

"When we signed our contracts with the BBC I don't think any of us were particularly aware of *Star Wars*," Briant tells *SFX*. "But when I was in my office in TV Centre I became screamingly aware, because everyone was talking about it!

"My feeling was 'Yeah, whatever... I don't want to go and see it because it's a feature film, and we're making a TV series.' On the other hand Pennant [Roberts, fellow *Blake's 7* director] went virtually to the opening night. I discovered him in his office the next day, with his head in his hands and tears streaming down his face!

"When I eventually saw *Star Wars* I could understand why. I'm not aware that it actually did us any harm, just in terms of viewing figures and publicity. It stopped science fiction being a niche market. It made it far more mainstream."

MAN ON A MISSION

Reputedly made for the same money as an everyday police drama – "I can see that there was a certain naïveté and optimism," admits Briant – the BBC's homespun space opera delivered a downbeat take on the future. There was none of the moral clarity of *Star Wars*, no hint of the gleaming utopianism of *Star Trek* – another inevitable comparison for TV critics of the day. In tune with a troubled, uneasy decade, this was science fiction with a dystopian streak the length of a light year.

Servalan (Jacqueline Pearce) and her crop.

Series creator Terry Nation famously pitched *Blake's 7* to the BBC as "*The Dirty Dozen* in space"; Robin Hood with stardrive – and it's Nation's fatalistic worldview that gave the show its edge. "Perhaps the unknown fascinates me most of all, and the greatest of all unknowns is the future," he told the *Radio Times* in 1977. "Frankly, I'm a bit pessimistic about it, I'm afraid."

"It was certainly seen as an important show when it was put together," says Briant. "Don't forget Terry Nation had a very good reputation with the BBC. He did *Survivors*, which I thought was a brilliant show for its time, and of course the Daleks [created by Nation] became another key to his fame."

Briant directed four episodes of *Blake's 7* series one, including opener "The Way Back", establishing the show's hero and this bleakest of galaxies. Political dissident Roj Blake opposes the Terran Federation, a repressive regime that uses Orwellian surveillance, show trials and pacifying drugs to maintain its rule. Implanted with false memories, arrested on trumped-up charges of child abuse, Blake is exiled to an interplanetary penal colony.

"Episode one certainly struck a note and the show was considered to be intellectually satisfying as well as action-packed space drama," remembers Briant. "We all knew that you had to do serious science fiction and not overacting crash-bang-wallop. I guess that the tone was set from everybody reading the script

> **"The show was considered to be both intellectually satisfying and action-packed"**

of episode one, which was pretty serious. I thought it was very surprising, powerful and frightening to make [child abuse] the reason for Blake being prosecuted. I wasn't shocked by it but I was going 'Bloody hell...'"

For the part of Blake, producer David Maloney rejected more obviously heroic choices in favour of Gareth Thomas, an impressive Welsh actor with the look of a particularly pensive rugby prop forward.

"He cast Gareth right at the beginning, almost as soon as he sat down to work as producer," says Briant. "As an actor Gareth raised the level of acting in the show by a huge percent. He found a truthful way of doing everything. He brought a reality to the thing.

"As the leading man he set a standard of acting that was above the average in many television programmes. There are some absolutely excellent actors around, and there are some very good actors around. And Gareth was excellent.

"One of the problems I have with science fiction on telly is you go, 'Oh, I just don't believe

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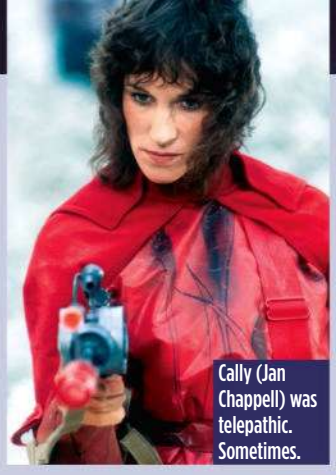


Cally (Jan Chappell) was telepathic. Sometimes.

Avon (Paul Darrow): you love to hate him.

The *Blake's 7* album cover that never was.

Jenna (Sally Knyvette): better than Anadin.

Michael Keating as the cowardly, clever Vila.

this, and I don't believe you as an actor believe it either. You're saying the words and not tripping over the furniture but you don't really believe it.' Gareth lifted you a hundred miles above that level. He set the tone for the production."

As series one unfolds Blake assembles a crew for his crusade, drawn from the ranks of criminals and outcasts: corrupt, acidically cynical tech genius Kerr Avon (Paul Darrow); petty thief Vila Restal (Michael Keating); smuggler Jenna Stannis (Sally Knyvette); convicted killer Olag Gan (David Jackson) and alien guerilla fighter Cally (Jan Chappell), a telepath from the world of Auron.

"We all sat around and discussed how important it was that there was good chemistry in the show. David was very keen on casting people who he thought would create that chemistry." Briant laughs. "And it all totally failed!

"What none of us thinking about the casting had worked out was that actually there were too many characters for the potential stories. Chris [Boucher, script editor] was trying to give the characters some personality, some of their own individuality, in the second episode. But by the time I came back to them [Briant returned to direct episode five, "The Web"], I'd already heard what was going on.

"They were five supporting actors in search of dialogue. Everybody wanted more dialogue, everybody wanted to be in more scenes, everybody wanted the storyline to be centring upon them – with the exception of Gareth. Virtually the whole cast was unhappy because they didn't have enough screen time. There were too many actors in search of a scene to play. And of course that engendered a degree of jealousy.

"I don't think anyone was jealous of Gareth, because he was the leading man," Briant continues. "It was *Blake's 7*, so Gareth was going to assume the lead in every story. But everybody else wanted to be the second lead. When Paul came in, Paul started getting more and more stuff to play, because his character was working so well."

More competition for that precious screen time soon arrived in the form of Federation →

A blaster is such a clumsy weapon, eh Obi-Wan?

A Federation Pursuit Ship. Pretty self-explanatory.

Supreme Commander Servalan. Played by Jacqueline Pearce, she was all androgynous crop-cut and camera-stealing charisma.

"Jacqueline would twinkle in the rehearsal room. She knew exactly what she was doing. She would camp up the sexiness in rehearsals, because that was the way she saw the character and that was the way she was playing it. Then of course you had Stephen [Greif] walking around in all that camp black leather as [ruthless Federation officer] Travis!"

ART OF ZEN

If Blake and his bickering, ragtag crew were outgunned and outnumbered by the forces of the Federation they did, at least, have one major advantage: the Liberator, a phenomenally advanced starship abandoned by a mysterious alien race – one that came complete with a sentient onboard computer named Zen (voiced by Peter Tuddenham). While Briant is quick to praise Roger Murray-Leach's striking design, he had his own vision for the craft.

"There had to be a spaceship," he tells *SFX*. "If it had been my spaceship, and this might have been discussed and cast away, I'd have had something looking more like the space station we saw, with boxes and things. Why does anything have to be sleek when it's going through a vacuum?

"Sci-fi has missed out. We're still designing stuff as if it goes through air or something. If you're travelling through a vacuum it might as well be a square box, or a ball. That would have been my suggestion. David would have gone, 'Oh, Michael, you're so boring!'" he laughs. "Of course the Liberator design is much better visually."

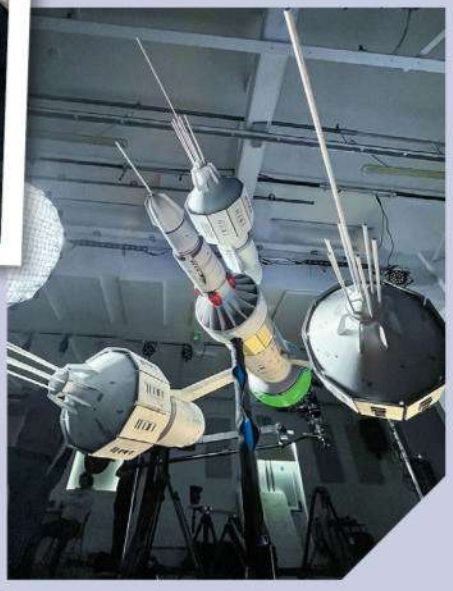
Briant also had his own, ultimately unused ideas for the craft's interior. "In the very early days I had a concept that the spaceship was a series of acting areas, a series of voids, and people would have their own private rooms. If you wanted to have a discussion, if you wanted to make administrative decisions [you would go there]. My concept was that we wouldn't have any controls or any control room, particularly. →

The Liberator, Blake and co's home for series 1-3.

MODEL

PICTURES © BBC. STOCK ELEMENTS © GETTY

Servalan's base, Space Command, recreated.



MODEL PHOTOS: CONNOR FLANAGAN

THE BLU-RAY release of *Blake's 7* series one offers optional new effects for every episode.

"In the end the whole thing came to about 459 shots," says Chris Thompson, part of the team that created the new visuals. "The original effects are still quite beloved. It was an incredibly talented modelling unit banding together and against all adversity trying to do the best they could."

Blending CG with old-school practical models, the Blu-ray team was determined to preserve the aesthetic of the series. "It needed to look in keeping with the time," says Thompson. "We had to focus on what its contemporaries were doing but also keep it very *Blake's 7*, rather than just copying *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*. A good example is the Liberator always comes at you or away from you but you never hang with it like you would on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*."

While the Liberator is a new build, the team tracked down some surviving spacecraft from the 1978 series. "We have the original London, refurbished, the original shuttle from 'Deliverance' and we were able to sneak in a cameo of the original Federation Pursuit Ship!"

The project also enlisted veteran BBC modelmakers Mat Irvine and Mike Tucker for extra authenticity. "They were absolutely wonderful to be around. They knew how to do this stuff.

"Its rather homemade quality is an element of *Blake's 7* that people love, and hopefully we've brought it forward. Any time the Liberator turns that's just Mike Tucker with a piece of string off-camera! Charm is when you know something's been made with love."

BEHAVIOUR

Behind Blake's new FX

BLAKE'S 7 DISC BREAKDOWN

DISC ONE
THE WAY BACK/SPACE FALL

- Two episodes, restored in HD with optional CG special effects
- Commentary on "Space Fall"

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES

- June Hudson's costume designs
- Character introductions: Blake, Avon, Vila, Jenna, Gan, Zen
- Gareth Thomas on Blake (Easter egg)
- Michael Keating on Vila (Easter egg)
- Sally Knyvette on Jenna (Easter egg)
- David Jackson on Gan (Easter egg)

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES

- *Liberation* – series one documentary
- *Swap Shop*: BBC One, 7 January 1978, Mat Irvine and *Blake's 7* models
- Continuities series one
- Series one model footage rushes
- Photo gallery: "The Way Back"/"Space Fall"

PDFS

- *Radio Times*: series one BBC Drama early warning synopses
- *Blake's 7* title storyboards
- Series one general production documentation
- Ian Scoones's VFX production designs
- "The Way Back": post-production camera script, production documentation
- Liberator deck production drawing
- "Space Fall": production documentation, rehearsal script, camera script
- "Cygnus Alpha": transmission camera script
- "Time Squad": projectile production drawings, rehearsal script, camera script, remount camera script
- "The Web": rehearsal script, camera script
- "Seek-Locate-Destroy": transmission camera script
- "Mission To Destiny": camera script
- "Duel": production documentation, rehearsal script, remount camera script
- "Project Avalon": camera script
- "Breakdown": transmission camera script
- "Bounty": camera script
- "Deliverance": rehearsal script, camera script
- "Orac": rehearsal script, transmission camera script

DISC TWO
CYGNUS ALPHA/TIME SQUAD

- Two episodes, restored in HD with optional CG special effects

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES

- Character introduction: Jan Chappell on Cally (Easter egg)
- Jan Chappell on black contact lenses (Easter egg)
- Pennant Roberts on "Time Squad" (Easter egg)

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES

- *In Conversation: Sally Knyvette*
- Deliverance '98 convention: Sally Knyvette, David Jackson, Gareth Thomas, Peter Tuddenham
- Photo gallery: "Cygnus Alpha"/"Time Squad"

DISC THREE
THE WEB/SEEK-LOCATE-DESTROY

- Two episodes, restored in HD with optional CG special effects
- Commentary on "Seek-Locate-Destroy"

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES

- Character introductions: Servalan, Travis

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES

- *A Glint In The Eye*: Stephen Greif tribute
- Deliverance '98 convention: Gareth Thomas, Peter Tuddenham, Michael Keating, Stephen Greif
- Photo gallery: "The Web"/"Seek-Locate-Destroy"

DISC FOUR
MISSION TO DESTINY/DUEL

- Two episodes, restored in HD with optional CG special effects

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES

- *Blue Peter*: BBC One, 23 February 1978 – Make a teleport bracelet

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES

- Deliverance '98 convention: Sheelagh Wells, Michael Keating, Gareth Thomas, David Maloney
- Deliverance '98 convention: David Maloney, Stuart Fell, Brian Clemett
- Photo gallery: "Mission To Destiny"/"Duel"
- "*Blake's 7* Theme": 7" A side
- "Federation March": 7" B side

DISC FIVE
PROJECT AVALON/ BREAKDOWN

- Two episodes, restored in HD with optional CG special effects
- Commentary on "Project Avalon"

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES

- Model footage from "Breakdown" (Easter egg)

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES

- *In Conversation: Michael E Briant*
- *Blake's 7: The Collection* Blu-ray trailer
- Photo gallery: "Project Avalon"/"Breakdown"

DISC SIX
BOUNTY/DELIVERANCE/ ORAC

Three episodes, restored in HD with optional CG special effects

EXISTING SPECIAL FEATURES

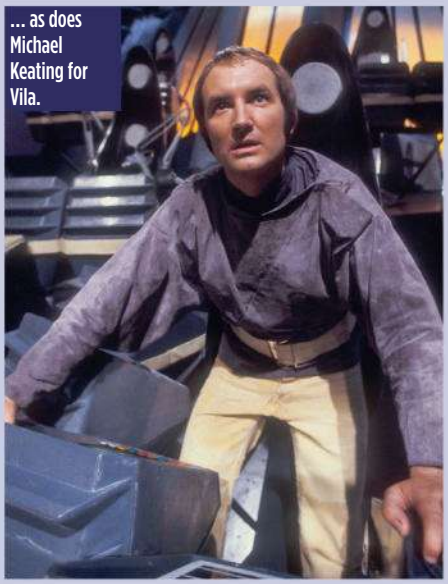
- Deleted scene from "Orac" (Easter egg)
- Series one outtakes
- DVD CG opening sequence
- DVD series two trailer

NEW SPECIAL FEATURES

- *The Making Of Blake's 7 – Part One* (Unseen DVD documentary)
- In The Studio: "Orac"
- Photo gallery: "Bounty"/ "Deliverance"/"Orac"

Avon, Blake and Vila whip out their weapons.

Sally Knyvette still voices Jenna for Big Finish...



... as does Michael Keating for Vila.

> **"Terry Nation had the gift of creating ideas that were different, that were special"**

We would have a computer area where you just went and thought and gave instructions by voice.

"I was outvoted by David and Pennant, which was absolutely fine. Halfway through the series David was generous enough to say, 'Actually, Michael, we've ended up doing exactly what you said...' It wasn't quite the same, but it ended up with Zen, and instructions being given to a computer. Zen was a bit more old hat sci-fi than my concept."

Briant was back for "Deliverance", the penultimate episode of series one. Was the show's future a cert at this point?

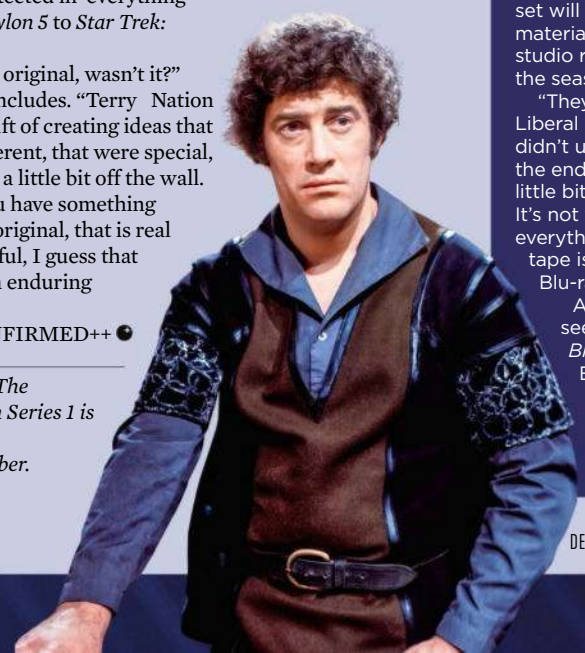
"Put it this way, there were financial issues. The show had overspent, and a certain amount of that was Visual Effects's fault and a certain amount of that was mine and a certain amount was everybody else's. I think the decision on it being renewed was not necessarily taken on how successful it had been, although that would be immensely important, but also on what budget it could realistically be made for. The people running money at the BBC were accountants. They really weren't interested in anything else. I know towards the end of it David was having a horrible, horrible time over the money."

Blake's 7 did return, fighting the Federation for three more series. Almost 47 years later it remains a treasured example of British SF TV, one that may never have conquered the big screen like its Skywalking rival but whose echoes can be detected in everything from *Babylon 5* to *Star Trek: Prodigy*.

"It was original, wasn't it?" Briant concludes. "Terry Nation had the gift of creating ideas that were different, that were special, that were a little bit off the wall. And if you have something which is original, that is real and truthful, I guess that gives it an enduring quality."

++CONFIRMED++

Blake's 7 The Collection Series 1 is out on 11 November.



THE WAY BACK

Bringing Blake to Blu-ray

"I don't think you can just rerelease something in new packaging and expect people to dig into their pockets again," says Russell Minton, executive producer of *Blake's 7 The Collection Series 1*, the new bells-and-whistles Blu-ray release of the show's first season.

"I've done the *Doctor Who Collections* for six years, so it was really just an extension of that. The *Blake's 7* fanbase might be slightly smaller but it still feels like they're the sort of loyal fans who want to watch their programme in the best possible quality, with some new material."

"Unquestionably this is the best that *Blake's 7* has ever looked," says Paul Vanezis, who oversaw the restoration of all 13 episodes – fixing damage, balancing colours, upscaling studio-recorded material to high-definition and making 2K scans of surviving film inserts, going back to the original negatives.

"I'm applying what we learnt on *Doctor Who*, but the tools are now so much more advanced than when we started.

"We can make old television look like it did in 1978. On a television back then you couldn't see the noise and the artefacts because the screen was only 20" across! Now they're 40" or 50" diagonally. You'll get the 1978 experience on a modern television – which you wouldn't get if you were watching the DVD!"

Vanezis tells *SFX* that the set will also include rare material, including original studio recording footage from the season finale.

"They wiped over it with the Liberal party conference and didn't use all the tape, so on the end of the tape there's a little bit of 'Orac' in the studio! It's not very much, but everything that was on the tape is going to be on the Blu-ray as an extra."

And will we eventually see all four years of *Blake's 7* immortalised on Blu-ray? "As long as sales are buoyant enough then the idea is to do them all, of course!" says Minton.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

ANDREW MICHAEL HURLEY

Witchfinder general: meet the biggest name in British literary horror

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Hal Shinnie

FOLK HORROR SNAGGED ANDREW MICHAEL Hurley with its wicker spears early. As a child, he lived in the former mill town of Preston, a place with a rich industrial heritage, but where there was nevertheless a sense of bleak uplands, the moors, looming. Here was an ancient, uncompromising landscape, representing beauty, freedom and space, but also tough to live in, even dangerous.

"Growing up in Lancashire, there's a huge, widespread and deep history of witchcraft and devilry," says Hurley. Go to Pendle and you can find villages that "haven't really grown or expanded" since the early 17th century, a time of religious strife, when the name came to be associated with witch trials. "There are so many places [in rural Lancashire] associated with hauntings," he adds, "I grew up on that as a kid. I loved ghost stories."

This sense of the past always being ready to impinge on the present runs through Hurley's fourth book *Barrowbeck*, given its name by the isolated community in which its subtly interlinked narratives are set. It's a project that began life as a series of short stories for Radio 4, *Voices In The Valley*, read by the likes of Maxine Peake, Reece Shearsmith, Toby Jones and Tamsin Greig.

"The brief was quite broad," Hurley says of the original commission. "It had to be something to do with the British landscape, possibly with a supernatural element." The only real restriction was, with broadcast in mind, length. From the off, Hurley's publishers were keen to do a print version, although the stories required work because, once stripped of the actors' vocal performances, they "felt a bit empty on the page".

UNCANNY VALLEY

Similarly to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, *Barrowbeck* is a book where narratives set in different times bleed into each other, and in doing so illuminate the overall themes. The first tale sets the tone for what follows as it shows us the first human settlers of the valley being granted permission to establish a community. "There is a sense that people who settle there are servants in some way to the gods – or whoever or whatever it is that's in this place that chooses the fate of people, or directs their lives," says Hurley.

As the book moves chronologically towards the present day and then into the near future, different characters, steeped in the cultures of their eras, interpret "that sense of presence" in Barrowbeck differently. However, the theme of "the natural world and our place in it, our relationship with it... whether we're part of nature, whether we're somehow separate, or kind of both at the same time" is central to all the narratives – tales that are often genuinely creepy in their mix of psychological and body horror.

BIODATA

From **Preston, Lancashire**

Greatest Hits
The Loney (2014), _Devil's Day_ (2017) and _Starve Acre_ (2019) have all received rave reviews. It's been announced that _Shōgun_ director Jonathan van Tulleken will adapt _The Loney_ for TV.

Random Fact
Hurley, whose parents were teachers, first wrote stories at school where there was "a little writing group" of teenagers penning gory stories heavily influenced by Stephen King and James Herbert.

A similar sense of conjuring eeriness from the everyday and the bleaker corners of the English landscape is present in Hurley's *Starve Acre*, published in 2019, and latterly a feature directed by Daniel Kokotajlo. Starring Matt Smith and Morfydd Clark, it's a film Hurley loves. "I was lucky enough to visit the set when they were filming a couple of years ago up in Yorkshire and it remains the most surreal day of my life," he says. "Walking to the place that I've invented in my head and seeing those characters in flesh and blood in front of me was a very odd experience."

GOLDEN YEARS

To return to folk horror, it's no coincidence that *Starve Acre* is set in the '70s. This was a "golden age" for the genre – or perhaps what we now think of as folk horror. It's unlikely, for example, that Nigel Kneale ever saw himself as a writer of folk horror, yet Kneale's 1979 reboot of *Quatermass* featured not just aliens harvesting humanity, but hippy cults and stone circles.

So does something in the wider culture link the '70s and the 2020s? One factor is perhaps a sense of uncertainty rooted in both decades being times of economic turbulence and environmental concerns. Faced with such daunting problems, one very human reaction is to look for community and the safety that brings.

"It's really at the heart of folk horror, that desire to be part of a small group of people, to want in, to know what they have: a kind of localised sense of being and belonging," says Hurley. "Of course, in folk horror, it's never that simple. You try and get in with the locals and bad things happen."

So, having built a career in folk horror in the decade since his debut *The Loney* crossed over into mainstream success, can Hurley see himself writing something set outside northern England? Probably not, but he would like to write something more urban, set in Preston or perhaps Manchester – a city where he currently teaches creative writing part-time, and a place of jarring contrasts.

"There are certain parts that look like Manhattan," says Hurley of the city, "and then you go across the street around the back and it's dirty streets and grubbiness." Just the kind of place where something nasty might befall the unwary...

Barrowbeck is out now, published by John Murray.

“It’s really at the heart of folk horror, that desire to be part of a group ”

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DECEMBER 2024

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edited by Ian Berriman

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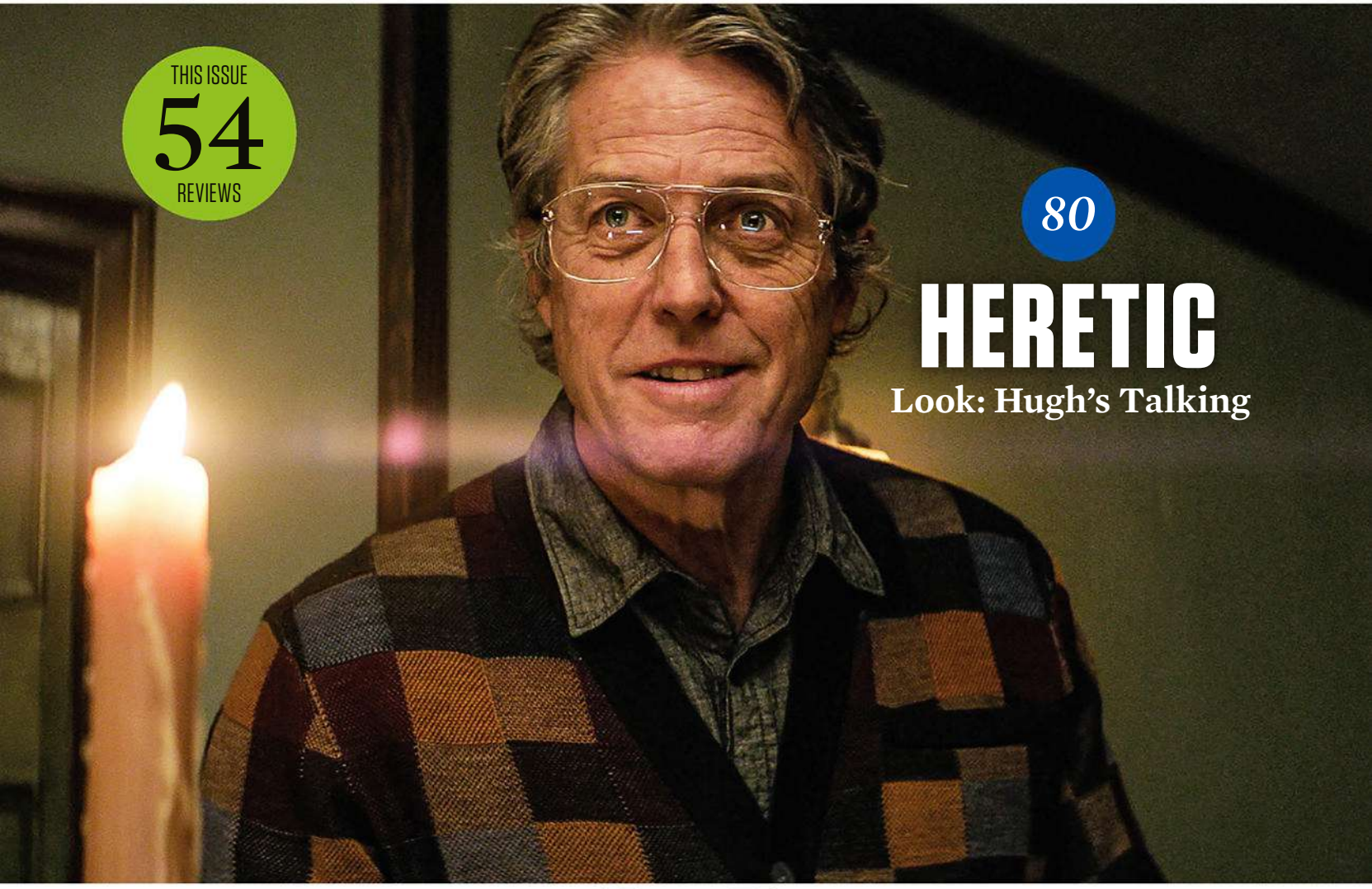

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HERETIC

The missionary admission

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 111 minutes

Directors **Scott Beck, Bryan Woods**

Cast **Hugh Grant, Sophie Thatcher, Chloe East, Topher Grace, Elle Young**

You would be forgiven for thinking that Hugh Grant isn't exactly the sort of actor you would expect to find heading up an A24 horror movie, but that is exactly what has happened with new chiller *Heretic*.

Fresh from having Adam Driver fight dinosaurs in *65*, directorial duo Scott Beck and Bryan Woods (who also wrote the first draft screenplay for *A Quiet Place*) have cast the British romcom star as the mysterious Mr Reed, a man two young Mormon missionaries are attempting to convert.

Naturally, events soon start spiralling out of control as Reed is revealed to be far more dangerous, menacing, and cunning than anticipated. The unpredictable casting of Grant in the leading role is a genius move, with the star completely stealing the spotlight with an utterly terrifying performance.

From the moment Mr Reed greets Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) and Sister Paxton (Chloe East) at his door, a sense of dread emerges, even though he charms them both with the offer of blueberry pie. We don't quite know yet exactly what he's hiding, but it's clear that Grant's character is bad news.

It's a slow reveal but Grant plays it perfectly, steadily unleashing Mr Reed's dangerous nature with every passing scene. It starts off with some unnerving comments during lengthy debates about religion, but soon enough becomes more extreme, and more physical, as Mr Reed further twists the knife.

Both Thatcher and East are able to match not only Grant's ferocity, but also his ability to inject humour into scenes (his impression of *Star Wars*' Jar Jar Binks during one particular moment will live in eternity). Sisters Barnes and Paxton may be wide-eyed and naive, but thanks to the actors' nuanced performances we never pity the young missionaires – nor are they ever made to be the butt of a joke.

It's easy to become invested in their survival given how tenderly Thatcher and East play the pair, and watching them find the courage to stand up for themselves is a real joy.

It's a shame, then, that the story falls apart, with *Heretic* being very much a tale of two halves. At first it's a tense, talky thriller which thrusts fascinating theological questions to the forefront with style, pushing buttons with its boldness. But that then gives way for something much sillier, which instead pushes the limits of believability.

> **"The unpredictable casting of Grant as the lead is a genius move"**

It feels almost like Beck and Woods had a great premise, but didn't know what to do with the final act, ultimately delivering twists that fall completely flat.

Thankfully though, Grant, Thatcher and East are continually stellar, meaning that even when *Heretic* is grasping at straws, the performances make it worthwhile.

Can we now please start casting Grant in more horror movies? He clearly knows what it takes to scare an audience.

Emily Murray

"Um... gosh. Well. Here we all are, then. Tea?"

i This isn't actually Hugh Grant's first horror movie. He also appeared in 1988 cult favourite *The Lair Of The White Worm*.

SMILE 2

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 127 minutes

Director **Parker Finn**

Cast **Naomi Scott, Rosemarie DeWitt, Lukas Gage, Kyle Gallner**

The killer ghoul who always leaves them smiling is back for more in this sequel to 2022's sleeper horror hit. And while its lethal MO is starting to lose something of its shock factor, there are enough gory frights and creepy chills in Parker Finn's New York-set follow-up to justify a second outing, by and large.

This time around it's comeback-trail pop star Skye Riley (Naomi Scott) who's inherited the evil curse, having witnessed her drug dealer (Lukas Gage) bludgeon himself to death with a bar weight. That means it's now her turn to be tormented by people with grotesque grins on their faces – visitations that make both Skye and her pushy mother (Rosemarie DeWitt) begin to question her sanity.

The pop milieu adds some glossy theatrics to the formula, with Scott presenting a credible facsimile of a Lady Gaga-esque starlet. It's ingenious too that her demons take the shape of clingy fans and stalkers, one of whom has the temerity to strip buck naked before chasing her around her garishly decorated apartment.

For all its bells and whistles, though, *Smile 2* is essentially a beat-for-beat reprise of its smaller and sharper predecessor, with all the diminishing returns that inevitably entails. Here's a franchise that could use a little blue-Skye thinking.

Neil Smith

SUPER/MAN: THE CHRISTOPHER REEVE STORY

★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 NOVEMBER
12A | **104 minutes**
Directors **Ian Bonhôte, Peter Ettedgui**

There is no greater story of heroism than Christopher Reeve's. Severely paralysed in 1995 after a horse-riding accident, the actor who played the first ever movie Superman proved to be a Man of Steel in more ways than one.

Vowing to walk again, he campaigned for disability rights like no other. All of which is conveyed in this tear-jerking documentary from Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui (*McQueen*), which mixes talking heads interviews with highly personal archive footage following Reeve's accident.

Despite the title, the film doesn't dwell too much on the four films Reeve made as Krypton's favourite son, although there are some choice anecdotes, including meeting his first partner Gae Exton in the lunch queue at Pinewood. With emotional contributions from Reeve's children Matthew, Alexandra and Will, there are some highly revealing insights into his life – not least how the family struggled financially, , with Reeve's care estimated at $400,000 a year.

Throughout, Bonhôte and Ettedgui ensure that *Super/Man* never becomes too mawkish. His friendship with late comedian Robin Williams is hugely touching. "Robin and I – we laugh as much as ever," he says. For all the tragedy, you'll feel the same. **James Mottram**

TERRIFIER 3

Slay ride

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
18 | **125 minutes**
Director **Damien Leone**
Cast **David Howard Thornton, Lauren LaVera, Elliott Fullam, Samantha Scaffidi**

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the shower... Janet Leigh's Marion Crane got off pretty lightly compared to what Damien Leone puts his characters through in the bathroom for the third instalment of his demonic clown franchise.

Art the Clown (David Howard Thornton) is back – laying in wait for five cobweb-covered years following the events of *Terrifier 2* until his nemesis Sienna (Lauren LaVera) gets out of psychiatric care, just in time for her worst Christmas ever.

But this is more than just gore – there's lore, with the connection between the leads expanded. It's reminiscent of Nancy returning to Springfield in the *A Nightmare On Elm Street* series, with Art notching up yet more inventive kills as they head towards a climactic battle that warrants Leone's description of this movie as his *The Empire Strikes Back*. Make no mistake, these actors are at the top of their game here.

> **"As offensive as it is blasphemous, brutal and brilliant"**

This is Leone's crossover moment, and it's the best *Terrifier* instalment yet – a modern slasher masterpiece that's as offensive as it is blasphemous, brutal and brilliant.

He's also clearly listened to his critics: more men die in excruciating ways, Sienna's trauma is effectively explored, and the running time has been snipped to just over two hours, although it zips along so quickly it feels more like 90 minutes.

Whatever you think of gore, slashers in general or *Terrifier* movies in particular, it's pretty well established that they're not to everyone's taste – but this might be the one that changes opinions. **Darren Scott**

i Additional filmed scenes may be released on disc, but Damien Leone insists that this version is his Director's Cut.

THE FRONT ROOM

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | **95 minutes**
Directors **Sam Eggers, Max Eggers**
Cast **Brandy Norwood, Andrew Burnap, Kathryn Hunter, Neal Huff**

An attempt to blend psychological horror with dark comedy, *The Front Room* works fitfully but also sometimes feels more like a club comic's mother-in-law joke soundtracked by a theremin.

Roundly ignored across the pond, this film by Sam and Max Eggers – twin brothers of *The Witch* and *The Lighthouse*'s Robert – stars Brandy Norwood as Belinda, already struggling with job aggravation, pregnancy worries and financial issues.

After the father of her husband Norman (Andrew Burnap) dies, they're asked (and financially induced) to move his stepmother Solange (Kathryn Hunter) into their home. Cue debates over child-rearing, religious attitudes, race and the pressure cooker build of tension between Belinda and her in-law, with Norman and the couple's new-born daughter caught in the middle.

Adapting Susan Hill's original short story, the writer/directors struggle to moderate the tone, leaving the movie as a whole unbalanced, but they're helped by some impressively considered stylistic choices and a willingness to push the envelope at times.

Yet what really makes the film work when it does is twofold; a committed, crazed performance by Hunter, and a marvellously nuanced turn from Norwood. Messy, but watchable. **James White**

The Penguin, guest-starring Peter Griffin's chin.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Someone insults Oz (and later ends up dead).**
- **Victor drives a car into something or someone, just in the nick of time.**

- **Someone enjoys a taste of the good life with a drink, a smoke or a meal.**
- **Sofia says something that makes the other Falcones profoundly uncomfortable.**
- **Victor misses a clear opportunity to leave his life of crime.**
- **A flashback reveals just what an unsettling little weirdo young Oz was.**

THE PENGUIN Season One

Return To Oz

★★★★☆

UK: **Sky Atlantic/NOW, Mondays**
US: **HBO, Mondays**
Showrunner **Lauren LeFranc**
Cast **Colin Farrell, Cristin Milioti, Rhenzy Feliz, Clancy Brown**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **There seems to** be mileage in taking a crime classic and mapping a Batman villain onto it... While Todd Phillips's first *Joker* film was (ahem) inspired by *Taxi Driver* and *The King Of Comedy*, this miniseries about Colin Farrell's titular criminal mastermind is effectively *The Sopranos* relocated to Gotham. A spin-off from 2022's *The Batman*, it picks up in the wake of that film, with parts of the city still flooded following the Riddler's attack.

Colin Farrell's Oz Cobb (cruelly nicknamed the Penguin because of the way he walks) is a mid-level gangster who spies an opportunity to grasp control of the underworld by pitting the city's crime families against each other. That starts with murdering mob boss Alberto Falcone and pinning it on the rival Maronis – a solid enough plan until Alberto's ruthless sister Sofia (Cristin Milioti) is unexpectedly released from Arkham Asylum.

Also crossing paths with Oz is Victor (Rhenzy Feliz), a young man who has lost everything. The two strike up an unlikely bond, one that provides Victor with a sense of purpose, but may doom him in the process. Victor and Sofia are at the heart of *The Penguin*, a strikingly dark series that commits to its premise with admirable conviction. The former offers someone to root for in a show populated almost exclusively with irredeemable bastards.

> **"This is a series doing its own dark thing"**

Sofia, meanwhile, is more layered than she first appears – as an episode set largely in Arkham shows, she has very good reason to be furious with the life that she was born into. Both Feliz and Milioti are terrific, as is Farrell, the latter performing under heavy prosthetics, but never less than utterly convincing. His Penguin is cruel and vindictive, but also capable of great warmth. That, of course, makes the season's inevitable downward spiral even more gut-punch tragic.

Also impressive is showrunner Lauren LeFranc's commitment to giving the audience what it needs, rather than what it perhaps wants. In an age where studios are considering the creation of fan focus groups to iron out any last trace of idiosyncrasy from franchise projects, *The Penguin* displays a pleasingly *Andor*-like ambivalence to "Easter eggs" and the like. While it's set in the same world as *The Batman*, this is a series doing its own dark thing with – almost – no trace of the Caped Crusader.

That will annoy some, and there's a not unfair argument that this is a standard mob drama show given a coat of Gotham paint. Similarly, we mentioned *The Sopranos* up top, and there are times when *The Penguin* feels so indebted to that show it borders on pastiche.

But these eight episodes are also genuinely enthralling, drawing real human drama from the material to give us a street-level view of this fallen city unlike any seen on screen before. **Will Salmon**

i Sofia and Alberto first appeared in classic '90s Batman series *The Long Halloween*, but *The Penguin* reinvents them.

TOMB RAIDER: THE LEGEND OF LARA CROFT Season One

Planes, Trains And Automobiles

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
Showrunner **Tasha Huo**
Cast **Hayley Atwell, Earl Baylon, Allen Maldonado, Richard Armitage**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The punnet's** jam-packed with this animated series, as cherry-picking from the franchise proves fruitful in easing fans into unifying *Tomb Raider*'s timelines. As Lara, Hayley Atwell's flawless delivery ticks every box for each iteration, with the character's sarcasm and wit making a welcome return. However, this adventure sees her unpacking more than just a few historical artefacts.

Seemingly contradicting *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider*'s resolution, the series rehashes Lara's past trauma from the Survivor trilogy. Alongside navigating her grief, she's keen to stop Charles Devereaux (Richard Armitage), whose plan for revenge on those who killed his father could also destroy the world.

Intriguing mythology and puzzle-solving excite throughout, running parallel with the series' jet-setting and quick pace, mirroring the game's past.

Dead again. Time to check GameFAQs again.

Camaraderie between established relationships brings comic relief, with Earl Baylon reprising his role as Lara's travelling companion Jonah, and techie Zip (Allen Maldonado) also returning.

However, in later episodes, Lara's constant accompaniment gets tedious. Her character arc soars, only to come crashing down as she's not given enough of a moment to succeed on her own.

Thrilling set-pieces and a peppering of fan service certainly add another string to the show's bow, but the fact that Lara's driving force is the need to rescue her friends, rather than simply having adventures for the hell of it, leaves us a few arrows short of the full quiver. **Vic Pheasey**

i Eagle-eyed fans will spot similarities between Devereaux's backstory and Kurtis Trent's in *The Angel Of Darkness*.

CURFEW

Men Behaving Meekly

★★½☆☆

UK **Paramount+, streaming now**
Lead writer **Lydia Yeoman**
Cast **Sarah Parish, Mandip Gill, Mitchell Robertson, Alexandra Burke**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **If you're willing** to accept the concept of a future where men are so driven by rage they need to be forced into a nightly curfew, yet such wimps that they meekly accept that curfew, then you might be able to sit back and enjoy the whodunnit mystery at the heart of *Curfew*.

In this dystopian thriller (based on Jayne Cowie's novel *After Dark*), all men in Britain are tagged and forced to remain in their own homes from 7pm to 7am so that women can walk the streets at night without fear. So when the brutally beaten body of a teacher is found outside a facility that carries out the electronic tagging, everyone assumes that the perp must be a woman. But DI Pamela Green (Sarah Parish), mother of the last girl to be murdered before the curfew was introduced, is convinced only a man could have carried out such a frenzied attack.

As a crime procedural *Curfew* is decent enough. Parish is excellent as the surly detective, while *Doctor Who*'s Mandip Gill, *X Factor* winner Alexandra Burke and at least three former EastEnders (Anita Dobson, Lucy Benjamin, Larry Lamb) provide solid support. There are twists and red herrings aplenty to keep you guessing, a couple of cheeky elaborate fake-outs, and a genuinely surprising denouement.

"There's a debilitating lack of credible world-building"

The main problem with the series is its debilitating lack of credible world-building. You just have to accept the central conceit, and that's difficult when you learn so little about how this new normal operates on a practical level. This also leads to some very muddled gender politics.

"You've got red on y..." "Yes, I know, thanks."

One of the show's most effective scenes involves a male cop receiving a phone call asking for help from his mother and not being able to go to her aid, because it's post-curfew. For one brief moment you get a proper glimpse into this world. It's a shame there aren't more. **Dave Golder**

i Three real-life UK TV journalists feature in the title sequence: Jeremy Vine, Storm Huntley and Dan Walker.

NAUTILUS

Redefining Nemo

★★★☆☆

- UK **Prime Video, streaming now**
- Creator **James Dormer**
- Cast **Shazad Latif, Georgia Flood, Jacob Collins-Levy, Benedict Hardie**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Don't get too** fond of *Nautilus*. A fanciful, family-friendly, steampunk voyage extraordinaire based on Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under The Seas*, the series was made for Disney+, who ultimately decided not to run it. Instead it's been bought up by various different broadcasters around the globe and is getting a piecemeal release.

All of which doesn't exactly fill you with confidence (except perhaps confidence that a second season is unlikely). Which is a shame, because while the show has multiple issues, at its best it's also a fun ripping yarn. Set at the height of British Colonialism in the mid-Victorian era, the series opens with the East India Company acting like an independent state. Britannia doesn't rule the waves – corrupt industrialists do.

Indian prince Nemo is a prisoner in an EIC penal colony where ethnic minority slaves have been forced to build the submarine Nautilus, partly based on Nemo's own designs.

The Company has plans to weaponise the craft but Nemo leads a revolution, steals the sub and pilots it out to sea with a new crew of freed slaves, political prisoners and a plucky English heiress and her kick-ass maid who he picks up along the way. Cue 10 episodes of scrapes with CG monsters set against an arc plot of the East India Company's nefarious ambitions.

Nautilus feels very much like one of those fluffy family fantasy shows the UK produced in the wake of the resurrected *Doctor Who*'s success in 2005: *Primeval*, *Merlin*, *Atlantis*, *Beowulf*. It's not quite monster-of-the-week stuff, but it's close.

However, it's also a show that feels contemporary, with the kind of slick CG effects that feel both spectacular yet slightly cheap at the same time (as if all that money, artistic talent and attention to detail has gone into something that still looks oddly artificial), and a suitably diverse cast.

Of course, some will moan "They've made *20,000 Leagues* woke!" ignoring the fact that in Verne's original work Nemo *was* an Indian prince, and the book was anti-colonialist.

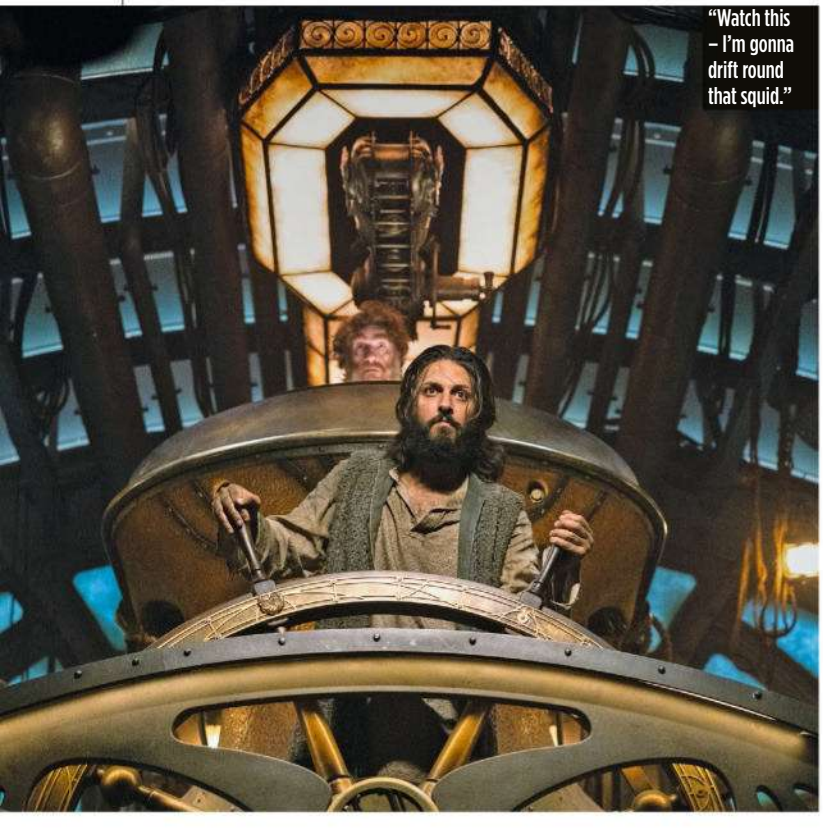
The cast is immensely likeable, headed up by *Star Trek: Discovery*'s Shazad Latif as a surprisingly nuanced Nemo, who has to wrangle the most enjoyably fractious bridge crew since *Blake's 7*. The extravagantly facial-haired villains are boo-and-hissable. The Nautilus sets are magnificently steampunk. The EIC's Dreadnought ship is a floating Star Destroyer. There's a lot to enjoy.

> "Cue 10 episodes of scrapes with CG monsters"

But too often it drags, with formulaic CG monster battles and less-than-thrilling encounters with hidden tribes and tinpot dictators. The show is much better when it's Nemo versus the East India Company. The highlight of the season is not a huge action set-piece but a tense, grudge-driven cricket match on an ice floe.

Nautilus was probably never going to hit the big leagues, but it was fun while it lasted.

Dave Golder



"Watch this – I'm gonna drift round that squid."

i In the finale, Nemo meets somebody with a brother called Phineas at London's Reform Club... It's a shared uniVerne!

THE DEVIL'S HOUR

Series Two

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
- Creator **Tom Moran**
- Cast **Jessica Raine, Peter Capaldi, Nikesh Patel, Benjamin Chivers**

EPISODES 2.01-2.05 **Season one of** *The Devil's Hour* may have been open-ended, but it also felt perfectly self-contained. The story of a grimly driven man, Gideon (Peter Capaldi), forced to relive his life over and over in an attempt to prevent an impending disaster, it was creepy, enigmatic and mesmerising. Did it need further expansion?

Season two feels less focused but even more enigmatic as it embraces its "alternate timelines" structure to flash backwards, forwards and sideways. Gideon now has an accomplice, having made care worker/cop (delete according to timeline) Lucy Chambers (Jessica Raine) aware of her past life too. Reluctantly she joins his crusade to discover the identity of a toy shop bomber before he carries out the atrocity. Meanwhile Lucy's out-of-time son Isaac starts developing new powers.

There's a nagging feeling that about 75% of season two is an artful exercise in water-treading, and the other 25% is set-up for season three. But the show remains compelling as Lucy is reluctantly drawn into adopting Gideon's ruthless MO.

Shot in the style of a bleak fairy tale, with outstanding performances across the board, this second run isn't as immediately satisfying as its predecessor, but its true worth may only become clear after the final season. **Dave Golder**

CITADEL: DIANA

The Di Who Loved Me

★★☆☆☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

- Showrunner **Gina Gardini**
- Cast **Matilda De Angelis, Lorenzo Cervasio, Maurizio Lombardi, Julia Piaton**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **The Russo** Brothers' slick but superficial spy thriller *Citadel* spectacularly failed to make a splash last year, but Amazon had already committed to a number of spin-offs. So like it or not, here they come.

First up, *Diana*, an Italian-language thriller set (copious flashbacks aside) in 2030, some years after rival intelligence agency Manticore wiped Citadel off the face of the Earth.

Well, almost. Matilda De Angelis plays Diana Cavalieri, a Citadel agent who was undercover as a Manticore agent for their Italian branch in Milan when the massacre happened. Since then, she's remained undercover waiting for a chance to exact revenge. But her situation becomes more complicated as the families running the Italian, French and German divisions of Manticore become enmeshed in a back-stabbing power struggle. And more complicated again when the ambitious, weapon-designing heir to Manticore Italy falls in love with her...

Slightly less glossy and more hard-boiled than the main show (though by the tiniest of degrees) *Diana* is pretty much more of the same: a rapid-fire, exhausting succession of gunfights, flashbacks and shock twists. For four episodes, as the show shamelessly pimps spy movies' greatest hits with Luc Besson femme-fatale chic, the most interesting thing on offer is Diana's asymmetrical 'do.

> **"A rapid-fire, exhausting succession of gunfights"**

Impeccably well-made and effortlessly stylish, the series is equally superficial and contrived, most likely to leave you with revelation-induced numbness.

The final two episodes perk up a little thanks to a world-threatening Bond-style evil plot and the story moving in a couple of genuinely unexpected directions. But whether these incremental wins offset sitting though the rest of it is debatable.

Dave Golder

"Stop, or I shall shoot you very, very stylishly."

i The odd structure in episode three is a 350m by 280m monument to Gibellina, destroyed in an earthquake in 1968.

GENERATION Z

Your elders and biters

★★½☆☆

UK **Channel Four, streaming now**

- Creator **Ben Wheatley**
- Cast **Jay Lycurgo, Buket Komur, Lewis Gribben, Viola Prettejohn**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **The premise** suggests out-and-out comedy: a bio-weapon spill which turns old folks at a care home into throat-ripping cannibals. Seasoned zombie fans may recall an undead Richard Briers shuffling along with a Zimmer frame in *Cockneys Vs Zombies*. However, the few chuckles *Generation Z* does provide are mostly engendered by exasperated disbelief.

The quickly quarantined small town of Dambury is the setting; the central focus a teenage friend group and their families. Other key players include Sue Johnston's Cecily, ground zero for the infection, and Robert Lindsay's maverick scientist Morgan. There's a kitchen-sink element to the approach – sometimes frustratingly so. You may find yourself yearning to give a teenage character a slap, and remind them that the killer pensioners are the pressing issue, not their love life.

But the principal problem is implausibility; even with such an outlandish premise, there should be a basic core of psychological realism. That's totally lacking.

In episode three, for example, the killer pensioners rock up at a second care home to share their "gift", where no one bats an eyelid at the blood smeared around their mouths. And in episode six, locals start rounding up and executing suspected "paedos" using an under-17 javelin team. Right...

The fact that the series includes not one but *two* sets of handy secret tunnels rather sums things up. Every episode has something that will prompt a snort and an eye roll. Perhaps all this piled-up preposterousness is meant to be rib-tickling. It just seems stupid.

On the plus side, there are two outstanding performances: Viola Prettejohn is hugely endearing as bug-eyed outsider Finn, a girl with reference points beyond her years, while Anita Dobson puts the toothy grin she once flashed at Dirty Den to chilling effect as a Nan who rises to lead the OAPs.

Generally speaking, though, the series feels scattershot and tonally messy. UK television can make this sort of show, and do it well – BBC Three's *In The Flesh* proved as much. *Generation Z* can't hold a candle to it. **Calvin Baxter**

"Dude! No way! That's a willow warbler!"

i The final episode includes a brief nod to 1984 nuclear war drama *Threads* – a traffic warden with a bandaged face.

"Say cheese!" "That would be illogical."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- The Doctor beats an enemy via the power of his gob.
- There's a mention of Ace's explosive Nitro 9 concoction.
- The sound of jazz or blues is heard.

- Old foes team with fascists to seize a Gallifreyan treasure.
- The Doctor destroys his old foes with that Gallifreyan treasure.
- A reference is made to the Doctor's oh so mysterious past.
- McCoy rolls his Rs (Take two swigs for "Rrragnarrrok")

DOCTOR WHO Season 25

Hi Who silver refining

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1988 | PG | Blu-ray

Directors **Andrew Morgan, Chris Clough, Alan Wareing**

Cast **Sylvester McCoy, Sophie Aldred, Sheila Hancock, Terry Molloy**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **For all its nostalgic** trimmings, this silver anniversary season finds *Doctor Who* reborn after a turbulent few years.

Scripted by future *Rivers Of London* author Ben Aaronovitch, "Remembrance Of The Daleks" delivers a confident, muscular opener, returning the show to its birth year of 1963 for a trad army vs monsters adventure that also feels thrillingly new.

"The Happiness Patrol", meanwhile, weaponises its own camp for a witty piece of SF satire, complete with Sheila Hancock's thinly-veiled Margaret Thatcher surrogate Helen A and a confectionery-crazed foe a writ away from Bertie Bassett.

Official 25th anniversary romp "Silver Nemesis" pales next to "Remembrance" while unwittingly recycling that story's plot, but its heady mix of Cybermen, treasure-hunting Nazis and time-travelling 17th century schemers remains breezily entertaining.

"The Greatest Show In The Galaxy" closes the season with a pinch of surrealism – a hearse-driving clown makes a haunting image – along with an intriguing enemy that hints at years of unseen adventures for the Doctor. The anniversary may be silver but it's something of a golden age.

Extras All four stories get extended editions, complete with newly upgraded effects – at an extra 16 minutes, "The Happiness Patrol" in particular has a chance to breathe. There are three genial interrogations by Matthew Sweet: an engaging Sophie Aldred discusses everything from companion Ace's afterlife to Beyoncé (55 minutes). Director Chris Clough reflects on his career (51 minutes). Script editor Andrew Cartmel gives a candid, illuminating account of his tenure; bafflingly there's no discussion of his legendary Masterplan (51 minutes).

Aldred's reunited with co-star and gal pal Lesley Dunlop (16 minutes), while a documentary on "Remembrance" actor Dursley McLinden is a compassionate celebration of a life cut all too short (55 minutes). Sculptor Stephen Mansfield revisits some memorable McCoy-era effects (nine minutes), and a retrospective on '80s merch offers a rapid-fire look at everything from Viewmaster reels to Peter Davison wallpaper (23 minutes). Elsewhere an escape room-style challenge (75 minutes) is a fun idea but never quite persuades you puzzle-solving is a spectator sport, despite the combined charisma of McCoy, Aldred and Bonnie Langford.

Each adventure gets the *Behind The Sofa* treatment (totalling 139 minutes) – guest stars Jessica Martin and Sheila Hancock budge up against the *Who* icons – and there's a chance to see a vintage American documentary that shadows the making of "Silver Nemesis" (55 minutes), complete with bonus interview clips.

You also get over 12 hours of studio floor/location footage, two entertaining '90s convention interviews with McCoy and Aldred (46/59 minutes), and two hours' worth of archive clips from shows like *Breakfast Time*, *Kilroy* and *Going Live* (20 in all). Plus: model footage, trailers, PDFs, galleries and more – including old DVD extras. **Nick Setchfield**

Actor Nicholas Courtney, aka the Brigadier, is among a line of tourists at Windsor Castle in "Silver Nemesis".

DAIEI GOTHIC

Revisiting old haunts

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1959/1968 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Kenji Misumi, Satsuo Yamamoto, Tokuzō Tanaka**

Cast **Kazuo Hasegawa, Yasuko Nakada, Kojiro Hongo, Miyoko Akaza, Shiho Fujimura, Akira Ishihama**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Nearly a quarter of** a century before J-horror blew up in the West thanks to films like *Ring*, Masaki Kobayashi's anthology film *Kwaidan* was an arthouse phenomenon. This box set from Radiance collects three similar takes on classical Japanese ghost stories.

Produced by Daiei Studios, they're all sophisticated affairs, which take meticulous care in presenting their Edo-era feudal settings. Two are based on tales adapted by Irish-born writer Lafcadio Hearn, whose 1904 collection of the same name was the source for *Kwaidan*.

The Ghost Of Yotsuya (based, instead, on a kabuki play) soon has you wondering why the title was spelt out in letters dripping blood, because until the last 20 minutes, it doesn't feel like a horror film at all. Centred on an unemployed samurai and his wife, but also mapping out a web of other relationships (a servant in love with the wife; the wife's sister, and her struggles to fend off an unwanted suitor), it feels more like a soapy domestic drama.

A final-reel plot to poison the samurai's wife finally delivers some gruesome imagery – a corpse dragging itself from a swamp is satisfyingly Sadako-esque – but it's rather a case of too little too late.

The remaining two entries are tragic love stories with a supernatural dimension. In *The Bride From Hades*, a kindly teacher is approached by a courtesan yet to accept her first "client" for help, and a relationship blossoms. Just one problem: she's actually dead, having cut her throat to escape an ignominious fate...

It's an affecting tale, and quite educational regarding Japanese customs and rituals (the Buddhist festival Obon; the chanting of sutras and pasting of prayer scrolls to ward off spirits), but rather overdoes the comic relief element, supplied via a drunkard, cowardly neighbour.

Girl-fronted '90s indie bands are due a comeback.

The set's standout is *The Snow Woman*. Based on a Hearn story also adapted in *Kwaidan*, it sees a young man spared by a "spirit of the snow" due to his youthful good looks. Years later, he meets a shy young woman, and they marry. But why is her body so cold? And why is she so nervous around fire?

It's a stunning piece of work, featuring ingenious lighting transitions which have all the wonder of a good magic trick (and none of the sterility of a CG effect). And the Snow Woman herself, with her gold eyes, blue lips and deathly glare, is a powerfully eerie creation. When it comes to elegant, artfully constructed chills, this is absolutely top tier.

Extras Decent, although cumulatively a little on the dry side. Japanese cinema expert Jasper Sharp provides a well-informed commentary on *Bride*, useful on cultural context. There are also two visual essays. In the first, a biographer provides an all-too-short introduction to Lafcadio Hearn (seven minutes); the second discusses the different approaches taken by some of the many adaptations of the Yotsuya story (22 minutes).

> **"Tragic love stories with a supernatural dimension"**

All three films come with appreciations by modern-day creatives: Hiroshi Takahashi, writer of *Ring*, discusses *The Bride From Hades* (18 minutes), while directors Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Pulse*) and Masayuki Ochiai (*Shutter*) have their say on *The Ghost Of Yotsuya* (20 minutes) *and The Snow Woman* (16 minutes).

While they don't prove any more insightful than your average critic, it's touching to see contemporary filmmakers expressing admiration for the work of their predecessors. Plus: trailers; an 80-page booklet including essays, archival reviews, and stories by Hearn. **Ian Berriman**

i Lafcadio was actually Hearn's middle name – inspired by Lefkada, the Greek island where he was born.

PANIC IN YEAR ZERO!

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 18 NOVEMBER

1962 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Ray Milland**

Cast **Ray Milland, Jean Hagen, Frankie Avalon, Mary Mitchel**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **An AIP** production, this low-budget nuclear thriller sees a suburban family fortuitously surviving an atomic strike on Los Angeles after setting out on a fishing trip with their caravan. They must then survive the lawlessness that follows.

Ray Milland (who also directs) is the father who turns survivalist to protect his family; heartthrob Frankie Avalon the teenage son gleaning a little too much excitement from taking potshots at hoodlums. "The women", as they're referred to, make up the numbers.

Though no doubt deemed hard-edged at the time, it seems quaint compared to *The War Game* or *Threads*. The blast deaths all occur off-screen, there isn't a flake of fallout, and the restoration of order is never in doubt. Such naivety provides a window onto the mentality of the time, though. And the question of just how far Milland's patriarch is willing to take ruthless individualism creates a good deal of tension.

Extras Kim Newman provides an overview of Ray Milland's career (21 minutes), while the actor himself charms in a 1975 interview conducted for the University of London (31 minutes). Joe Dante provides an appreciation of the film in a 2016 interview (nine minutes). Plus: a critical commentary, also from 2016; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

COLUMBIA HORROR

Lorre and disorder

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1932-1944 | 12 | Blu-ray

Directors **Various**

Cast **Peter Lorre, Fay Wray, Boris Karloff, Nina Foch**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Unlike its rivals**

RKO and Universal, Columbia Pictures was never renowned for its horror output. Perhaps the lady with the torch in the studio logo simply scared the shadows away.

And as a blanket label, "horror" feels a little disingenuous here, given that only half of these production-line potboilers truly edge into the deeper darkness. *Air Hawks* (1935) is a straight aviation thriller that tips into genre by virtue of a plane-zapping death ray that appears to have escaped from a cliffhanging Republic serial.

Island Of Doomed Men (1940), meanwhile, is a tepid crime tale, redeemed by Peter Lorre as the sadistic ruler of an illegal prison colony, "the dirtiest racket that any man ever invented". Lorre's brilliantly watchable, all sweat and bug-eyed perversion.

Behind The Mask (1932) finds a third-billed Boris Karloff mixed up in a turgid, rather stagey story of a drug-smuggling operation, one that's elevated all too late by a genuinely macabre climax. Elsewhere *King Kong*'s Fay Wray is deposited on a voodoo-haunted tropical isle in 1934's *Black Moon*; very much of its day, the film has a queasy shudder of white paranoia, from the title down.

More successful – and far more entertaining – is *Cry Of The Werewolf* (1944), with Nina Foch as a gypsy princess cursed by lycanthropy. The wolf transformations are achieved through clever use of shadows – she turns into an actual, four-legged animal, not some Lon Chaney Jr-style hybrid – and there's some authentic suspense.

Despite the mother of all cop-out endings, 1944's *The Soul Of A Monster* proves the highlight of this set, an eerie, metaphysically minded tale of a Faustian pact. With flashes of inventive direction and superb, shadow-drenched cinematography, it's almost a Satanic noir, one that persuades you "the present world isn't everything – there are other facets to life."

Extras All six films have commentaries from film experts including Kim Newman, Stephen Jones and Eloise Ross. There's a profile of now-forgotten leading man Jack Holt (11 minutes), an analysis of gifted cinematographer Burnett Guffey (20 minutes), and a particularly enjoyable celebration of the "absolutely magnetic" Peter Lorre by Jonathan Rigby (16 minutes).

An audio interview with Constance Cummings finds the veteran actress recalling her life and career in 1997 (68 minutes). Archival curios include newsreel footage of true life aviator Wiley Post, who makes the '30s equivalent of a celeb cameo in *Air Hawks* (one minute), and a US Navy training film from 1943, with a fleeting appearance by *Cry Of The Werewolf*'s Nina Foch (14 minutes).

Each film receives a dedicated photo gallery. This limited edition set also comes with a 100-page book of essays and profiles.

Nick Setchfield

"Uh, actually, I ordered the salad?" "Don't make a fuss!"

> "As a blanket label, 'horror' feels a little disingenuous"

Behind The Mask's Edward Van Sloan also appeared in Universal horrors *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy*.

HÄXAN

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1922 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Benjamin Christensen**

Cast **Benjamin Christensen, Clara Pontoppidan, Oscar Stribolt, Astrid Holm**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Pioneering**

Danish filmmaker Benjamin Christensen believed silent film best captured "thoughtful dreams, fantasies and adventures". Over a century on, his extraordinary, unshakeably creepy *Häxan* suggests he was onto something.

Part academic lecture, part crowd-thrilling sensation and a whole black mass of undiluted nightmare, it charts an occult history, from ancient Egyptian cosmology to medieval witch trials, possessed nuns and beyond. Now impressively restored with a skin-prickling score by Matti Bye, its images seem more striking, more primal than ever.

Extras No fewer than three alternate cuts, including a 1968 version narrated by Beat Generation icon William Burroughs. There are alternative scores by Geoff Smith and Bronnt Industries Kapital, and an audio commentary by horror experts Guy Adams and AK Benedict.

Guillermo del Toro celebrates a film he calls "a very disturbing artefact" (14 minutes), while a witty and insightful visual essay unpicks its themes and history (12 minutes).

Older archive material includes a 1941 intro by Christensen (eight minutes), test footage (12 minutes) and a recently unearthed costume test (two minutes). Plus: an 80-page booklet and six postcards.

Nick Setchfield

THE RADLEYS

A light bite

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 15 | SVOD
Director **Euros Lyn**
Cast **Damian Lewis, Kelly Macdonald, Bo Bragason, Harry Baxendale**

SKY CINEMA **"But I like garlic,"** puzzles Rowan Radley, baffled by his dad's revelation that he and his whole family are vampires. It turns out garlic intolerance is specifically linked to blood-drinking – and that it's basically the only bit of classic vampire mythology that applies in this slightly daft adaptation of Matt Haig's YA horror-comedy novel.

Well, that and the blood part. When Rowan's older sister Clara loses control and kills a boy, their strait-laced parents call in rock 'n' roll deviant Uncle Will to help. He's more of a liability than a rescuer, and his chaos leads a wannabe vampire hunter right to their door.

Despite eschewing most of the established rules, *The Radleys* doesn't really have any new ideas of its own. Addiction metaphors? Wan introspective types refusing to kill, even to survive? Yes, and yes. We've seen it all before. Even the family secret angle has been done, in the likes of Julia Ducournau's *Raw*. Mostly, what sets this story apart is its deeply British setting.

Unoriginal as it is, though, a strong cast and some dramatic use of the Yorkshire coast mean that it's still an enjoyable watch – just one that'll feel more exciting if you've not seen many other vampire films.

Sarah Dobbs

ℹ Matt Haig took the family's name from *To Kill A Mockingbird*'s Boo Radley, another "pale-faced, misunderstood outsider".

THINGS WILL BE DIFFERENT

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 18 NOVEMBER
2024 | 15 | Blu-ray/download

The work of an editor for indie darlings Benson & Moorhead, this time-loop tale is the sort of thing they'd make.

After a robbery, a brother and sister lay low in a farm existing outside time. But when the day arrives to go home, unseen forces demand payback first...

The sibling relationship is well played, and the film makes a virtue of its cheapness. But good luck flowcharting how the hell it all slots together.

Extras Commentary; bonus scene; storyboards. **Ian Berriman**

CHILDREN OF THE PINES

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | N/A | Download

Discovering your parents have basically adopted your high school sweetheart is scary, but there's worse to come in this creepy domestic horror, in which a mysterious cult and a couple of even more mysterious kids serve as unlikely therapists for a family with plenty of deep-seated issues.

It's unmistakably a low-budget effort, with strong TV movie vibes, but a solid emotional core makes it pretty effective nonetheless.

Sarah Dobbs

YOU MIGHT BE THE KILLER

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2018 | 15 | Blu-ray

One for the Venn diagram intersection of *Scream/Buffy* fans, this slice of heavy meta turns the slasher on its head, as the killer is the protagonist.

Sam (Fran Kranz) can't help it, mind. Controlled by an evil mask, he's initially unaware, calling geeky pal Chuck (Alyson Hannigan) for guidance.

Brisk and neatly structured, it makes witty use of captions. But ultimately it is just another summer camp massacre.

Extras Two commentaries; six interviews; more. **Ian Berriman**

DADDY'S HEAD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **This somewhat** unfortunately named British indie draws horror from the difficulty a child can have accepting a parent's death, as the isolated, *Grand Designs*-esque home of young Isaac is invaded by something with his late father's grinning fizzog.

Never fully spelling out the source or motivation of its shapeshifting entity, it has fairly predictable beats. Millennium FX's skittering critter supplies some shiversome imagery, though, and the avant-garde nest it constructs in the woods also impresses. **Ian Berriman**

I VAMPIRI

Gothic revival

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1957 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Riccardo Freda**

Cast **Gianna Maria Canale, Carlo D'Angelo, Dario Michaelis, Wandisa Guida**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Though not the** nation's first horror film, *I Vampiri* (*The Vampires*) was a significant landmark, kick-starting a wave of Italian gothic which brought us classics like *The Mask Of Satan* – whose director, Mario Bava, stepped up from cinematographer here to complete the film via reshoots when Riccardo Freda walked off the project.

Set in Paris, it's probably not quite what you'll be expecting. While there are traditional gothic elements, like a castle with a skull-bedecked tomb and secret passages (plus a comical amount of randomly hanging tattered fabrics), this is a contemporary tale, as much a detective story as it is a horror.

The title's somewhat misleading, as there's no neck-biting; the modus operandi is more medical, with young women kidnapped and drained of blood to restore an ageing Duchess – an update on the legend of Elizabeth Bathory. The use of a manipulated drug addict as a henchman feels very modern, and you can trace a line of influence to the likes of 1960's *Eyes Without A Face*.

While there are moments (such as the abrupt ending) which tip you off to the production's troubles, it hangs together pretty well. And although not especially innovative (Rouben Mamoulian used similar techniques on 1931's *Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde*), the seamless in-camera ageing effects are cleverly done.

> **A significant landmark, kick-starting a wave of Italian gothic**

Extras This Radiance release also offers an abbreviated UK cut, and a US dub which makes both trims and titillating additions, such as a young woman being attacked as she takes a bath.

A 2013 retrospective (17 minutes) draws on Bava footage from a 1975 chat show. A new expert talking head (21 minutes) is particularly strong on explaining how the film was completed, with a subplot trimmed and a character reworked. Tim Lucas is similarly forensic in his excellent commentary track. You also get a 15-minute reminiscence by Mario Bava's son, Lamberto. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ Director Riccardo Freda makes a couple of cameo appearances in the film, as a forensic expert.

EL VAMPIRO

Criaturas de la noche

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1957/1958 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Fernando Méndez**

Cast **Ariadne Welter, Abel Salazar, Germán Robles, Carmen Montejo**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If you come to this** two-disc set of Mexican vampire movies for a different cultural spin, you may be disappointed. A hacienda supplants a castle; there's the odd sombrero. But essentially, this is the European vampire transplanted to Latin America.

In *El Vampiro*, young Marta returns to her childhood village, to find one of her aunts has just died. A second's clearly been turned by the seductive Count Duval (Germán Robles, who bears a faint resemblance to *Buffy*'s Spike, James Marsters). Abel Salazar (also the film's producer), supplies easy charm as a sceptical doctor.

Great fun, it enthusiastically embraces all the vampiric clichés: the villain's high-collared cape and outsized medallion; his self-opening coffin; most of all, the way he repeatedly flaps his cloak and transforms, via the magic of a basic edit, into a rubbery bat on strings.

Sequel *El Ataúd Del Vampiro* (*The Vampire's Coffin*) resurrects the villain with ease (you simply pull the stake out). A more urban affair, it sees the vamp set on making Marta his bride, bolting on a comically ropey wax museum (full of mannequins with painted-on beards) to supply the threat of instruments of torture.

One fantastic sequence in which Duval stalks his next victim, casting towering expressionist shadows on the walls, makes it all worthwhile. And if nothing else it adds "hypnotism via chandelier" to the list of vampiric abilities.

Extras The highlight of this Indicator release is a touching interview with Abel Salazar's two daughters (22 minutes) about their "marvellous father". A similar featurette speaks to the son of writer Ramón Obón (22 minutes).

Three further expert talking heads focus on Germán Robles (20 minutes), co-star Carmen Montejo (31 minutes), and production designer Gunther Gerzso (15 minutes). The late Robles discusses *El Vampiro* in a 2007 commentary; though the star is utterly charming, this is pretty thin on details. You can choose to watch both films in either Spanish or English. Plus: a French photonovel; galleries; trailers; 80-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ The marketing for the sequel tempted kids with the offer of free pencils "made from the wood of the vampire's coffin".

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Alien: Romulus • Beetlejuice Beetlejuice • Blink Twice • Borderlands • Broken Bird • The Crow • Deadpool & Wolverine • Harold And The Purple Crayon • I Saw The TV Glow • Speak No Evil • The Substance • Tuesday*

THE INVASION

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

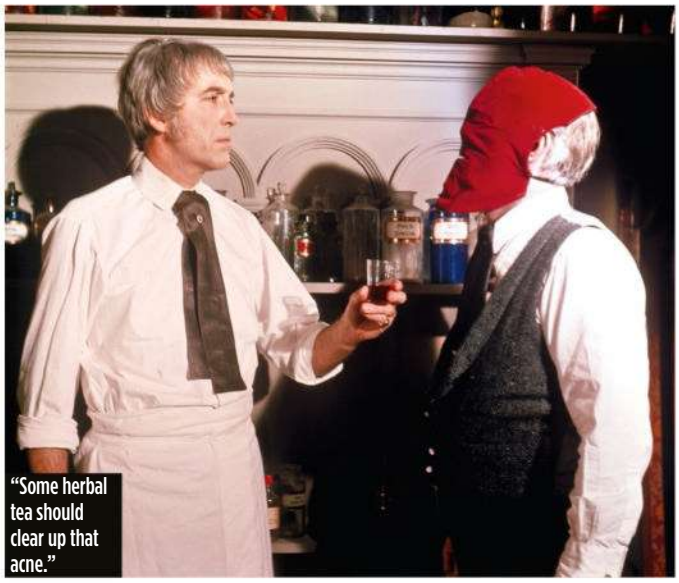
RELEASED 11 NOVEMBER
2007 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Oliver Hirschbiegel**
Cast **Nicole Kidman, Daniel Craig, Jeremy Northam, Jeffrey Wright**

Of the four films based on Jack Finney's 1954 novel *The Body Snatchers*, *The Invasion* is, by consensus, the weakest link. But it has at least acquired some additional resonance now, thanks to Covid-19.

Rather than being replaced by pods which grow into emotionless doppelgangers, here people are taken over from within, as an infection integrates alien DNA. You could call it pandemic prophecy, but that would be dangerously close to endorsing a conspiracy theory, as the takeover's further facilitated by a flu vaccine, developed with suspicious speed... actually the humanity-robbing infection, of course.

Such delivery methods may have more plausibility, but the idea of a *Body Snatchers* movie sans pods is a thoroughly rotten one, which robs the story of its most potent visual. The film is blighted with intensely irritating rapid-fire editing. And they even have the nerve to serve up a happy ending! A small role for Veronica Cartwright (star of the 1978 movie) is scant compensation.

Extras Arrow Video supplies two solid video essays for this UHD debut. One canters through all four adaptations (24 minutes); another focuses on the pandemic parallels (16 minutes). There's also a chatty new commentary by a pair of over-thinking podcasters. Plus: four archival featurettes (29 minutes); gallery; trailer; poster; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



"Some herbal tea should clear up that acne."

THE OBLONG BOX

The Red Mask Of Death

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1969 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Gordon Hessler**
Cast **Vincent Price, Christopher Lee, Rupert Davies, Uta Levka**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Though billed on** the poster as "Edgar Allan Poe's classic tale of the living dead", the only thing this AIP film shares with his short story – not even a supernatural tale – is its title. And while it uses the Poe theme of burial alive (here, the box is a coffin), even that isn't *really* the focus. A witch doctor's ritual curse is more to the fore, in a film which for its time has a surprisingly critical attitude to colonialism.

Otherwise, the script is a messy melange of 19th century clichés: a dash of Jack the Ripper here; some Burke and Hare-style graverobbers there; plenty of bosomy doxies.

It boils down to the conflict between two brothers: Vincent Price's Sir Edward, and the facially disfigured Julian (Alister Williamson) who, having been locked up in a room for years, has scores to settle.

> **"The script is a messy melange of 19th century clichés"**

The principal hook is what Julian looks like under the red mask he dons. The much-delayed reveal proves to be a big fat disappointment. Don't get overly excited by the presence of both Price and Christopher Lee on the cast list, either – the two horror icons only fleetingly share screen time.

Extras Price's daughter Victoria has sweet recollections of "the coolest dad in the world" (17 minutes), discussing his love of African art and his Anglophilia. There are three Poe-themed shorts; the stand-out is 1962's "The Pit" (27 minutes), an effective, mildly experimental black and white take on "The Pit And The Pendulum".

Roger Corman discusses his Poe movies in a 2013 interview (10 minutes). Plus: a 2015 commentary by a film historian; gallery; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

Witchfinder General's Michael Reeves was originally set to direct, but then was hospitalised due to mental health issues.

ROUND UP

Recent movies now coming to shiny disc include **DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE** (4 November, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), After Wade Wilson learns the TVA are set to delete his universe, due to Wolverine's death in *Logan*, he hops realities to find a replacement. We said: "The funniest in the series by some way." Bonuses include director/Ryan Reynolds commentary and 43 minutes of bits and bobs, including three deleted scenes. **LATE NIGHT WITH THE DEVIL** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray) is framed as a recording of a US talk show whose guests include a girl possessed by a demon. We said: "Immaculately paced, with alarmingly outré moments of body horror." Bonuses include four interviews and critical commentary. The Limited Edition adds a book and six art cards. In **LONGLEGS** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) an FBI agent (Maika Monroe) is tasked with tracking down Nicolas Cage's serial killer. We said: "Transfixing, thrilling and deeply disturbing." Bonuses? Basically director's commentary and 19 minutes of interviews. Morfydd Clark and Matt Smith play a grieving couple in '70s-set folk horror **STARVE ACRE** (out now, Blu-ray & DVD – dual format). We said: "Creepy stuff, with elements of *Blood on Satan's Claw*, *Don't Look Now* and *Hereditary*." Extras include commentary and 70 minutes of interviews. Finally, the latest TV box sets include **HOUSE OF THE DRAGON Season Two** (18 November, Blu-ray/DVD) and **STAR TREK: PRODIGY Season Two** (11 November, Blu-ray).

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Sleeping Worlds Have No Memory

by Yaroslav Barsukov

A MAN EXILED FOR HIS CONSCIENCE. TWO KINGDOMS LOCKED IN A COLD WAR

A thought-provoking meditation on the human condition, and a compelling exploration of memory and its profound impact on our identities and relationships.

Shea woke when the skyraft made a leap toward hell.

Under the daylight's varnish, the cabin took a dive, jolted, plunged. *Maybe we're passing through a pocket of air*, his brain whispered. *Lie still for a minute, it will blow over*. He tore his hand from the mattress and raised it to his face: his pinkie trembled. The next jolt threw him off the couch, and somewhere in the gondola's bowels, two dozen throats produced a collective sigh.

Shea was about to join them when a thought sent him into nervous laughter – *a fall from grace. Perhaps a literal one this time.*

Well, he refused to go out like that.

Still buttoning his shirt, he peeked into the corridor. To his right, the door to the luxury suite swung open, spewing a man in a smoking jacket who sized him up and, in a flat voice, said, "Are we going to die?"

So, the southern lady didn't lie – first class really was taken.

Shea squeezed past him. "Don't stand here. Go back to your room and hold on to something."

Behind, the flat voice repeated, "Are we going to die?"

"If we are, I'll let you know."

The corridor widened into the dining lounge, pristine white, shards on the floor, cutlery quivering in unison with his own pounding on the bridge door.

"Skipper? What's going on?"

After a good 10 seconds came, "Who is it?"

"Ashcroft." A new dive slapped him against the wall.

The door half-opened, and a pockmarked face appeared in the gap. "Minister?"

"A former one. Let me in."

"Let him in, Jonah," another voice said.

The control cabin was more like a slice of a lighthouse's lantern room than a naval ship's bridge; four people would've been a crowd here. The captain, wearing an olive dress coat of Owenbeg, their destination, stood at the helm – for Shea, he came across as a collection of unconnected details: a wide nape, a sideburn, a crease on the trousers – and the pocked face, probably the first mate, clutched a second wheel.

"How may I help you, Minister?" said the captain without turning.

"By telling me what the hell's going on."

"First time in the duchy, I presume?"

"Me and a bunch of other people, apparently. The passenger cabins are learning to sing opera right now."

"It's just turbulence."

"I know turbulence." The room made another dance move, and Shea grabbed an iron lever to steady himself.

"You have a strong grip, Minister," the pockmarked boy said. "Please let go of that."

"I used to box at school. And I know turbulence. *This* feels like a drunken sailor party."

"A bad day, that's what it is," the captain said. "It's the air. The air hits *it*, gets pushed in all directions, gains speed. Roughs us up."

"The air hits what?"

"To starboard, Mr Ashcroft."

Still not turning, the captain waved his hand, and Shea looked. Gasped. Took a few uneven steps toward the windscreen.

Behind it, there was something vast, something dark, a stretch of an evening sky pasted onto midday. To say the tower was colossal was to compare a volcano to a matchstick: it was a mountain's trunk, freed from the foothills, and the scattering of villages in its shadow could've been cardboard toys.

His responsibility? How could he *do* anything to it, *ensure* anything about it?

"Heavens," Shea said, "what altitude are we at?"

"Eight hundred feet. Skyrafts' maximum."

"How high is the damn thing?"

"A thousand, give or take. And I hear they're planning to put another thousand on top of it – but really, I should ask *you* that, no?"

"Pardon?"

"No fools here, Lord Ashcroft."

At that moment, Shea saw himself from the outside: a noble, barging into the bridge, pushing aside a man who'd probably been saving for a year to book a ride in a luxury

The Author

Yaroslav Barsukov is a writer of fantasy, science fiction, and everything in between. His debut novella, *Tower Of Mud And Straw*, was shortlisted for the Nebula Award. A graduate of both the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute and the Vienna University of Technology, he now lives in Vienna, Austria, with his wife and son. His short fiction has appeared in *Galaxy's Edge*, *Nature*, and *StarShipSofa*, among others.

suite. The tone, the words. *Skipper*.

He stretched out his hand. "I don't think we've been formally introduced, Captain."

"Liam Salas. Welcome to the border, Minister."

"I'm not a"

"I wanted you to know – I'd actually planned to visit your cabin before you so gracefully waltzed in – I'm happy you're here. It's a difficult subject, of course, politically, but my son was among the protesters."

The handshake lasted longer than custom demanded, which prevented the next plunge from sending Shea to the floor. "I did nothing anyone else wouldn't have done. One's got to suffer from serious empathy issues to use gas on people."

The captain smiled with one side of his mouth. "And yet the queen gave the order, didn't she?"

He was about to add something but then shrugged. Visibly disturbed by the fact he'd heard what he'd just heard, the pockmarked boy sunk his head into his shoulders, tightening his grip on the wheel. The pause threatened to become uncomfortable, and Shea turned to the window behind which the mammoth structure grew closer.

He squinted. "What are those purple spangles? There, and there. What are those dots?"

"Oh, that. That's the *tech*," the captain said. "Drakiri devices."

Shea opened and closed his mouth, and the bridge squeezed around him while memory served up an image of a different room, gray walls, soot stains, chairs with twisted legs, the odour of something unknown, something foreign, and another scent that turned him inside out – of charred flesh. "This is insane. You're using Drakiri technology to build that thing?"

"I'm just steering this raft. But yes, the builders use the tech."

"Why wasn't it in the reports?"

"How should I know? You must ask the duke – or the chief engineer, Brielle."

"Why wasn't it in the reports?" Shea whispered.

Lena, Lena, look at what they've done.

"I have nothing against Drakiri or refugees in general," the captain said. "Half the duchy still curses the day Daelyn's father granted them a settlement with us, but I think it was about the only thing the old man did right."

"Mr Salas, believe me, I have nothing against Drakiri, either. But this..." Shea drummed his knuckle against the windshield. "The tech is a ticking bomb. I'm talking from experience."

They both looked out the window, in silence, at the approaching giant.

The worst thing is, Sis, I don't always remember your face. Sometimes I see you in a dream, and when I wake up, the details dissolve, dissipate into what the daylight brings: the warmth and the glow and the dust. That's what makes me, a grown man, bawl – the fact you're becoming a memory.

They told me it was all part of the "healing", Lena. Can you believe that?

A yellow trail extended from the raft pier in a relatively straight line, not a proper road, more like a track ploughed in the field by a huge finger. At the end, four carriages waited.

Shea let the luxury suite guy pick his horse first, while the other passengers, in white and brown trousers and dresses, went on foot. Half must've spewed their guts an hour before, and faces wore a shade of pale, but the eyes glowed: *look at it. Look*.

The tower blocked the sun, throwing a mile-long blanket over the fields, the poplars, and the village cowering at the foot of the hill on which the caterpillar of the castle slept. Ants cluttered across the tower's vertical body, half of them suspended by threads at such height that Shea had to raise his chin. Construction workers. Some crawled in and out of the spots leaking purple glow.

The thin band at the horizon was the kingdom of Duma, with its perhaps less advanced but plentiful skyrafts; and his imagination painted a different sky, crimson, ships raining down in fireballs, the bolts from the tower's ballistae hissing across the clouds. No wonder Daelyn had invested so much in the construction – it was her legacy, the most radical defensive structure ever attempted by man.

His head swam.

In a dash of normalcy, a gaunt driver, leaning against the fence, stared at the people walking past.

"I'm here," Shea said. "They didn't, by any chance, send a welcoming cortege for me?"

The man shifted his eyes to him. "What?"

"Did they send a carriage for me from the castle?"

"If they did, they sure haven't told me."

They looked at each other.

"Well... could you at least help me fetch my luggage?"

Even when the horse picked up a steady pace, the tower remained immobile, as though forming a whole with the salmon clouds, a painting on an enormous flat canvas.

In the distance, across the fields, a row of yellow lights floated like will-o'-the-wisps.

"I hope I'm not imagining things," Shea said.

"Wives." The driver clicked his tongue. "Fiancées. Lanterns for the foremen at the construction site who're staying for the night."

"Don't they have gas lamps inside?"

"It's a tradition. The lanterns are hung on the inner wall as a reminder of the hearth and home, or so I've heard."

In the short breath before sunset, the clouds at the horizon seemed to pick up the glow from the procession – a trick of the eye, it stirred a new thing in Shea. Perhaps there was a lantern for him, too – but was it a sign of the end of a season or its beginning? He shuddered: a feeling visited him, of something lying in wait behind the tower's contours, and he looked away.

ISTOCK.COM/GETTY

Sleeping Worlds Have No Memory – a unique blend of SFF and noir – is published 12 November from Caezik Press, available in print and ebook.

RED SONJA: CONSUMED

Lives And Loves Of A She-Devil

★★★★½

RELEASED 21 NOVEMBER

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobooks

Author **Gail Simone**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

Flame-haired, polyamorous (at least in her latest iteration), and ever capable of despatching multiple enemies and downing multiple drinks, Red Sonja is a character who has much to recommend her. Since being created by writer Roy Thomas and artist Barry Windsor-Smith for Marvel back in 1973, partially based on a character from a story written by Robert E Howard and latterly transposed into Conan's Hyborian Age, she has energetically cut a swathe through her different incarnations.

This latest version is the work of Gail Simone, the writer who, from 2013, helmed a run of Sonja comics for Dynamite Entertainment and has a track record in reimagining female characters who have toiled too long under the male gaze. To judge by *Consumed*, her debut novel, Simone plans to spend further time with Sonja because while this is a book that serves in part as an origin story, laying out why and how Sonja becomes a near-mythical warrior, it leaves ample potential story threads for further novels.

In flashback scenes, we learn just how Sonja became as she is: huge of appetites, fiercely independent and, somewhere deep within, traumatised by events that as a child she lacked the agency to prevent. It's trauma that, Simone strongly hints, has left the adult Sonja unable to make lasting connections – except for the bond with her loyal battle horse, Sunder.

In the novel's main plot, we first encounter Sonja on the run from a woman she loves, a proud queen: Ysidra and her Wolf Pack of loyal warriors. Compounding the sense that we're dealing with someone who doesn't necessarily think too much about consequences, Sonja has pinched Ysidra's Asp, a piece of jewellery that looks fantastic, but has huge significance to the royal and her people – and which, Sonja will soon learn, has supernatural powers.

Sonja, then, is a thief, but not someone beyond redemption. She is also a proud daughter of Hyrkania, a barbarian warrior who prides herself on never dodging a fight. When reports of dark happenings afflicting her homeland reach her, she heads home to discover how an evil that has long lurked underground is breaking the surface – as too are long-suppressed revelations about Sonja's childhood.

Without giving away spoilers, it's a narrative that allows Simone to work towards a set-piece battle at the novel's conclusion that's as blood-spattered, widescreen and vivid as anything you'll find in a modern grimdark novel.

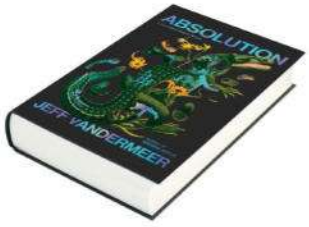
Yet for all the violence and gnarliness embodied in a character such as Sylus, an assassin written as a study in sociopathy, one thing that's fascinating about *Consumed* is precisely that it doesn't take its beats from 21st century fantasy fiction. Rather – and this is hardly surprising considering its roots – the novel's plotting calls to mind comics and franchise movies.

Those words, incidentally, aren't written as a criticism. Then there's Simone's prose style, which nods to the kind of epic fantasy – including, of course, prose written by Conan creator Robert E Howard – that influenced Michael Moorcock rather than the plethora of fantasy fiction that has followed on.

In another author's hands, this might make for a novel that seems antiquated, but the sense of Simone having huge fun in a new medium means this is never the case. Instead, an understated formality in her writing – and it seems odd to be writing those words of a novel where Sonja has threesomes – seems fresh and new.

It's a triumphant reboot of a familiar character that has some serious points to make, but which never forgets a central truth of popular entertainment: that it should first and foremost be entertaining. **Jonathan Wright**

i Simone's mother is a fan of *Red Sonja*, the 1985 film starring Brigitte Nielsen, and "insisted" her daughter write *Consumed*.



ABSOLUTION

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

528 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Jeff VanderMeer**

Publisher **Fourth Estate**

It's been 10 years since we first ventured into Area X. Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy (*Annihilation*, *Authority*, *Acceptance*) was released over the course of a year and immediately became a landmark of recent science fiction. The series, about a remote area of North America mysteriously transformed – perhaps by alien intervention – was a gripping mixture of body horror, bureaucratic thriller and ecological themes that defied easy categorisation.

This unexpected fourth volume takes us back in time to before *Annihilation*, with a trio of prequel novellas. In "Dead Town", set 20 years before Area X formed, a group of biologists are studying the local flora and fauna when an ominous stranger arrives.

In "The False Daughter", Central agent Old Jim (a memorable side character from *Acceptance*) investigates the Seance & Science Brigade, only to find his life starting to unravel. Finally, "The First And The Last" tells the tale of Lowry and the doomed first expedition into Area X, the outcome of which loomed ominously over *Authority*.

VanderMeer's writing remains as precise and unsettling as ever. *Absolution* pulls off the trick of fleshing out Area X's history, without giving too much away. A terrific return to the Southern Reach that only adds to the original trilogy's uneasy thrills. **Will Salmon**

THE TELLER OF SMALL FORTUNES

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 NOVEMBER
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Julie Leong**
Publisher **Hodderscape**

This is the cosiest of cosy fantasies – the kind of novel that should be devoured while sitting in a sunny window with a mug of hot chocolate in one hand and a happy purring cat on your lap.

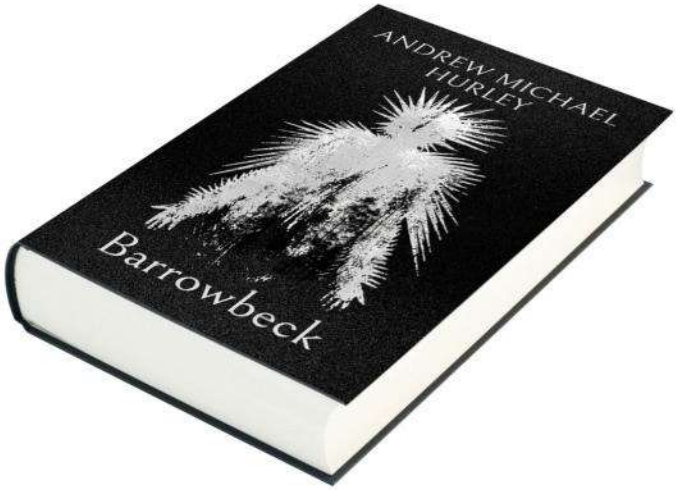
It's the story of Tao, a runaway who travels the countryside using her powers as a seer to tell the "small fortunes" of the book's title. While she can see bigger events in the lives of the people she meets, it's safer simply to tell them trifles: tiny snippets that come true without getting her into trouble. As a Shinn (think: Asian), she already deals with everyday racism from the unenlightened villagers of her adopted homeland.

Tao doesn't think she's lonely, but then she meets three other travellers: hulking solder Mash, who's searching for his missing child; sneaky thief Silt, who's trying to find himself; and the wanderlust-filled Kina – a baker who, in a cheeky plot twist, happens to invent the fortune cookie.

There are encounters with trolls, side quests, family drama and the distant threat of war, but there's never really any major jeopardy.

Instead this is a breezy, jolly adventure with an adorable found family. And sometimes that's all you want from life. Pop a cat on your lap, then fall for its charms.

Jayne Nelson



BARROWBECK

Village Of The Damned?

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
304 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Andrew Michael Hurley**
Publisher **John Murray**

A remote settlement on the Yorkshire/Lancashire border, Barrowbeck is not like other places. Or perhaps – and this idea says much about why Andrew Michael Hurley's latest book is so unsettling – there are many places like Barrowbeck: remote and rural, idyllic on a sunny day, but where dark and ancient forces lurk. Those who live here do so on sufferance as guests – or prisoners.

The dangers of Barrowbeck are made clear by the opening chapter. Set two millennia ago, maybe longer, "First Footing" follows desperate "marshfolk", exhausted and on the run from raiders, as they search for somewhere safe to live. The valley of Barrowbeck offers sanctuary, but the old gods reserve the right to exact a price from those permitted to settle.

Subsequent chapters, each set in a different time and arranged chronologically, detail the costs paid by the settlers' descendants. Each chapter can be read as a standalone – in part a reflection of the book's genesis as a series of short stories for BBC Radio 4's *Voices In The Valley* – but there are subtle links between the tales that give *Barrowbeck* a novel's sense of forward propulsion. The dystopian "A Valediction", set in 2041, completes the narrative arc.

In-between the distant past and the near future, Hurley has the space to craft narratives that, while they're almost all replete with folk horror twists and gloomy northern vistas, are very different in tone.

Set in 1899, "After The Fair", a tale of tiny circus animals, has the hazy quality of magical realism. If the rug-pull in "Sisters" (2022), a study of obsessiveness and loneliness, isn't entirely unexpected, it's no less devastating, rather like reading an episode of *Tales Of The Unexpected*. "Hymns For Easter" (1922) is melancholy, a study of the effects of a conflict far away on a small community.

At times, you might want more resolution of individual story strands, but maybe that's the point. The life of a community is open-ended – until the old gods grow impatient. **Jonathan Wright**

i Hurley will be doing talks this month at the British Library and in Edinburgh and Folkestone. See linktr.ee/barrowbeck.

BLOOD OVER BRIGHT HAVEN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
448 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **ML Wang**
Publisher **Del Rey**

Suzanne Collins was pretty clear about the allegories at the heart of the *Hunger Games* books, but many readers missed them anyway. That's unlikely to happen with *Blood Over Bright Haven*. Yes, it's a fantasy novel, but it's about as subtle as a rage-bait thread on X.

Sciona Freynan is an ambitious mage, determined to make her mark on the magic-powered society of Tiran. No woman has ever been admitted to the halls of the Tirasian Magistry before, and not everyone's pleased about their smashed glass ceiling.

As an insult, Sciona is assigned an unqualified assistant: Thomil, a refugee from the Blighted world beyond the city. But the two bond over the ways the world oppresses them, and Thomil turns out to be surprisingly adept at magic.

You'll figure out that his people's violent fate was caused by Tiran's magical "energy-siphoning" techniques way before the characters do, as the book is equal parts righteously angry anti-capitalism and made-up fantasy words.

It's well-argued, and clear-eyed about how difficult oppressive regimes are to overthrow, but as a result it's a pretty grim read – especially as Sciona is so wildly unlikeable. There are brave choices here, and the prose is compelling enough, but it feels more like being preached at than being told a story. **Sarah Dobbs**

DESIGNING TERRY PRATCHETT'S DISCWORLD

Moving pictures

★★★★☆

RELEASED 7 NOVEMBER
256 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Paul Kidby**
Publisher **Doubleday**

This cover for *The Last Hero* homages Edvard Munch.

Kidby at work in his studio (a converted garage).

This lavish hardback celebrates the work of Paul Kidby, whose witty and characterful work has come to define the look of Sir Terry Pratchett's Discworld.

The early chapters cover Kidby's pre-Pratchett life and career, his early work, his desire to illustrate *The Lord Of The Rings* (only to realise that Alan Lee had beaten him to the punch), and his initially faltering attempts to make first contact with Pratchett himself.

From there we get lavishly illustrated chapters that break down key parts of the Discworld mythology: the wizards, the witches, the Watch and more. We learn that Death's good strong teeth come from one of Kidby's previous jobs making dentures, and see myriad alternate designs for the Summoning Dark – a sigil that has become a popular tattoo.

Throughout, Kidby offers bite-size insights into the creation of this impressive body of work, but unsurprisingly the art itself is the main focus. The final chapter, however, is a genuine surprise as it offers details of numerous unfinished Pratchett stories and novels. Some of these were already public knowledge but others – *The Turtle Stops, Up School!* and more – are detailed for the first time here, alongside illustrations that give a tantalising, if melancholy, flavour of what might have been. **Will Salmon**

Kidby's very first Discworld drawnings (of Rincewind).

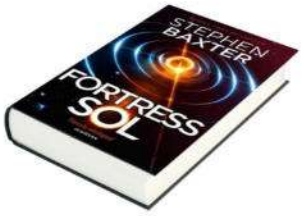
A pencil sketch for the cover of 2011 novel *Snuff*.

The Last Hero art, based on a pic of Apollo 11's crew.

Some of a set of *Unseen Academicals* football cards.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL KIDBY

i When devising the look of the Librarian, Kidby visited Monkey World, an ape rescue centre in Dorset, to sketch orangutans.



FORTRESS SOL

★★★½☆

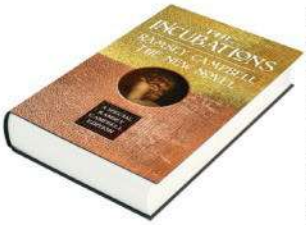
RELEASED OUT NOW!
416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Stephen Baxter**
Publisher **Gollancz**

What would humanity do if we perceived we were under alien attack? How would we react at a psychological level? Such are the questions that animate Stephen Baxter's latest novel.

One answer to all these questions is, of course, that we would do different things. So it is that when "lumes", short for "luminous menaces", literally start to consume Neptune, the fear that these strange "semi-sentient cannonballs" have been sent to cause havoc results both in the establishment of a starship-building programme and the creation of "the Mask", a vast structure that hides the Solar System from prying eyes.

Fast forward 1,000 years and the starship Lightship has travelled back from a colony planet. Its crew includes Muree, a young woman whose growing bond with Rab, one of those who watches the void for potential alien encroachments, has the potential to change the trajectory of human society. Both, in their different ways, have difficult relationships with their parents.

What unfolds is a book that essentially functions as an understated love story, dramatising the tension between those who embrace the wonders of the universe and the more cautious. There's a little too much conversational exposition, but the tech marvels Baxter imagines are fabulous. **Jonathan Wright**



THE INCUBATIONS

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 NOVEMBER

256 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Ramsey Campbell**

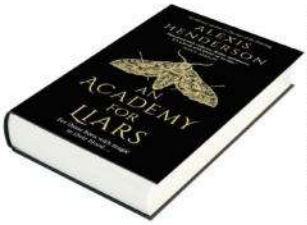
Publisher **Flame Tree Press**

Sixty years on from the publication of his first book, Ramsey Campbell is still writing horror that feels fresh, contemporary and surprising. Who else would mark that anniversary with a novel that's as much a very English comedy of manners – with an unassuming lead character crying out to be played by Ben Whishaw at his most diffident – as it is folk horror?

When driving instructor Leo Parker returns from a trip to the German Alps, he doesn't return alone. He was visiting a remote mountain village that was twinned with his home town in a symbolic gesture of rapprochement after the Second World War. But Alphafen is a place with many dark secrets, both supernatural and of human origin. Back in Britain, both catch up with Leo, as he starts causing unsettling effects on those around him.

With the emphasis on eldritch dread rather than blood and gore, The Incubations is almost kitchen sink horror, with a huge dose of wry humour, grounded characters and a sly take on nationalism in post-Brexit Europe.

Campbell's trademark ambiguous dialogue fits perfectly with the themes of miscommunication, while his idiosyncratic descriptive prose hits new heights ("Fat clouds had crumbed meadows with sheep"). So long as you can handle Leo being such a passive drip, this is infectious reading. **Dave Golder**



AN ACADEMY FOR LIARS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

464 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Alexis Henderson**

Publisher **Bantam Books**

Turns out, everyone disappointed that they didn't get their letter from Hogwarts at age 11 might not have missed their chance to go to a magic school after all.

Lennon Carter is in her mid-twenties, with a failed career and a failed engagement, when she gets her call to enrol at the mysterious Drayton College. There, on a campus tucked away in a hidden pocket of space and time, students with special abilities are taught to harness the force of their will.

Because this isn't YA, though, there's no evil wizard to worry about. Instead, the threat is closer to home. Lennon falls for her brooding advisor, but he tells her to keep her distance for her own safety – and the more Lennon learns about Drayton's secrets, the more horrors are uncovered. Dark academia doesn't get much darker than this.

But despite a breathless and violent finale, this is really a story about fighting your inner demons. For much of the book, Lennon is a frustratingly passive narrator who ignores the way her friends and family point out many of her problems are of her own creation.

When she finally gets it together, it makes for an immensely satisfying conclusion... but oof, it takes a long time to get there. You might need to rally your own willpower to do so. **Sarah Dobbs**

FEAST WHILE YOU CAN

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

304 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Authors **Mikaella Clements, Onjuli Datta**

Publisher **Simon & Schuster**

Maybe every small town has a bogeyman. A story about someone, sometime, who did something terrible, and now haunts a particular neighbourhood, waiting to grab anyone out past curfew.

In this brilliantly visceral queer horror, the local legend is that a cave off the beaten track holds a monster that eats people. Angelina and her brother Patrick don't believe it's real, until one night it is, and the only person who might be able to save them from its insatiable appetite is Jagvi – the woman they're both in love with.

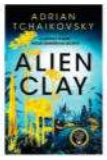
Decidedly not a book for kids, this is a heady novel of desire and despair. The prose is seductive; co-authors Mikaella Clements and Onjuli Datta conjure the claustrophobia of small-town life so vividly you can almost smell the stale beer at the bar Angelina works in.

Their monster is terrifying – an unseen thing that can invade a person's mind as easily as it can crack their bones – but it's the way people respond to it that's truly terrifying.

Don't worry, though, this isn't a "the real monsters are us" cop-out. Rather, it's a chilling reminder that, supernatural or not, most monsters come with a network of people willing to turn a blind eye to their crimes. **Sarah Dobbs**

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks is Adrian Tchaikovsky's **ALIEN CLAY** (★★★★★, 14 November, Tor). Earth's totalitarian government exiles a dissident academic to the planet Kiln. There, he finds a

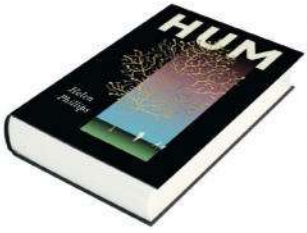


chaotic and aggressive ecosystem (expect some body horror) and strange structures built by some mysterious lost civilisation. We said: "Subtexts and allegories are everywhere... A book that asks plenty of questions, and it's certainly food for the brain." John Scalzi's **STARTER VILLAIN** (★★★★★, out now, Tor) is a very different kettle of fish! It follows supply teacher Charlie, who learns that his recently deceased Uncle Jake has left him an international supervillain outfit, complete with hidden

volcano lair, minions, typing cats... and vengeful rivals. Does he have the smarts to take on the family business? We said: "Laugh-out-loud funny, intricately plotted and big-hearted enough to touch even the grumpiest cynic... Establishes Scalzi as SF's leading humorist." Featuring a setting reminiscent of Renaissance Italy's city states, James Logan's **THE SILVERBLOOD PROMISE** (★★★★☆, 21 November, Arcadia) – the first entry in fantasy series The Last Legacy – follows a roguish card-sharp whose estranged father has been

murdered, and must unravel a conspiracy. We said: "Belongs in the modern tradition Joe Abercrombie's made his stomping ground. It's less gritty and knowing, but there's an undercurrent of social satire."

Reviews



HUM

★★★★☆

RELEASED 7 NOVEMBER
272 pages | Hardback/ebook
Authors **Helen Phillips**
Publisher **Atlantic Books**

Sometimes, it's the sheer mundanity of a dystopia that makes it work. Never mind elaborately dressed teenagers battling to the death on live TV; instead, how about those website pop-ups asking how much personal data you're willing to surrender to advertisers, but everywhere all the time?

In the near future, AI is so sophisticated and pervasive that vast swathes of jobs have been automated and every taxi ride, doctor's visit or corner shop trip is a gauntlet of targeted upselling. Unemployed due to the tech she helped develop, May signs up for experimental surgery to pay the rent. One set of facial recognition-fooling adjustments later, May splurges some of her windfall on a family holiday to the city's botanical gardens. What could go wrong?

Plot synopsis can't really convey the experience of *Hum*. It's got the prose style and the focus of literary fiction; on one level, this is a familiar tale of a married couple failing to communicate while raising two kids. Yet Helen Phillips wrings unbearable tension out of the intersection between such ordinary lives and her SFnal future.

The advert-addled kids are aggravating and the adults' decision-making will have you head-desking, but as a portrait of people slowly losing it in a consumerist surveillance hellscape, *Hum* is weirdly nail-biting. **Nic Clarke**

WE ARE ALL GHOSTS IN THE FOREST

★★★★☆

RELEASED 7 NOVEMBER
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Lorraine Wilson**
Publisher **Solaris**

People often draw a distinction between their lives online and in the "real world", as if the two are entirely unrelated. It's not true, as the politics of the last few years has repeatedly proved. Lorraine Wilson's still, strange novel makes this literal. It's set in a post-apocalyptic world haunted by the ghosts of a collapsed internet, now free to cause chaos in the physical realm.

Katerina works as a herbalist in an isolated village. When a boy named Stefan arrives, bringing with him a string of strange happenings, the locals begin to turn on Katerina, forcing her and Stefan to head out in search of his father and an answer to a mysterious digital plague.

Wilson conjures an eerie and original setting here, one that blends folklore and witchcraft with technology. This heady atmosphere is enhanced by the book's leisurely pace and Wilson's evocative descriptions of a changed world that's part a John Christopher-style reversion to quasi-medieval old ways and part fairy tale.

The clichés of the post-apocalypse genre are skirted by keeping the how and the why of this collapse vague, which will frustrate some. But this is a book about the collision of the natural world and the internet, and about Katerina's inner life, which has spectres of its own. **Will Salmon**

THE FINAL ORCHARD

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 12 NOVEMBER
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **CJ Rivera**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

In a future where cyborg adornments are both the key to longevity and a fashion statement, one company aims to be the ultimate disruptor by developing organic enhancements. One problem: farming the organic material is highly unethical. It's not something genetics pioneer Rosio Arata wants anything to do with, until an unscrupulous businessman finds the leverage he needs to force her to.

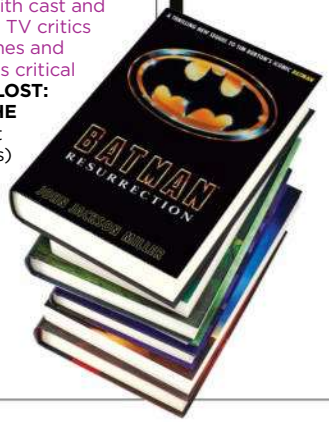
The Final Orchard desperately wants to be *Black Mirror* but ends up more like *The Uglies*, thanks to its parallel plot structure, with one storyline following the children who are being grown to be harvested. Sorry if that's a spoiler, but it's obvious this is what's happening a few chapters in, and it's not clear if the author expects that revelation to be a big shock or not (even the different tenses used in the two storylines signpost this).

It's all just so dispiritingly contrived. The unconvincing world-building is crafted by "what the plot needs" rather than "what makes a believable society". Similarly the characters are storytelling chess pieces, rarely acting in any way recognisably human, and being subjected to a series of overly familiar teens-escape-dystopian-hell tropes.

Some effective moments of body horror and pacy action sequences perk things up, but mostly this is a humourless trudge. **Dave Golder**

ALSO OUT

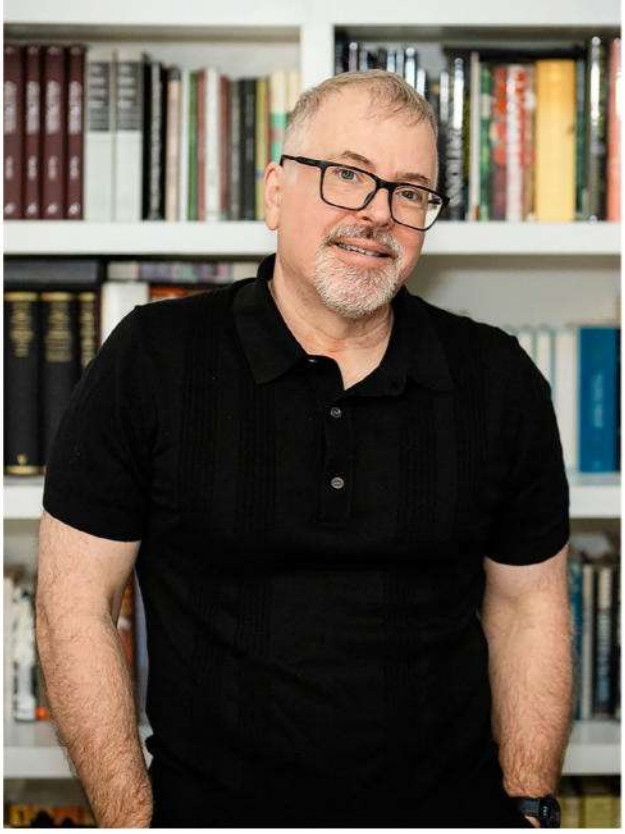
As ever, there are plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Set in Nigeria, Nuzo Onoh's **WHERE THE DEAD BRIDES GATHER** (out now, Titan) follows an 11-year-old girl who, after helping her cousin escape a vengeful ghost once engaged to the man she's about to marry, is transported to the realm of dead brides. Expect the surreal, gross and transgressive from the 11 stories in Eliza Clark's body horror collection **SHE'S ALWAYS HUNGRY** (7 November, Faber & Faber). Same goes for a night out with the *SFX* team. A sequel to Tim Burton's 1989 film, John Jackson Miller's **BATMAN: RESURRECTION** (out now, Random House) sees survivors of exposure to Smylex, the Joker's chemical weapon, still crowding Gotham City's main hospital, and remnants from his gang leading an arson campaign. Could the Clown Prince of Crime somehow have survived? The relationship between Number One and Pike is at the heart of Una McCormack's *Strange New Worlds* novel **ASYLUM** (5 November, Pocket Books). When a terrorist is taken into custody after trying to sabotage a trade agreement, Una's past associations resurface... Scratching your head regarding what to get a *Ghosts* fan for Christmas? Making Of book **GHOSTS: BROUGHT TO LIFE** (out now, Bloomsbury) might be just the ticket. As you'd expect, it features interviews with cast and crew. Finally, TV critics Emily St James and Noel Murray's critical companion **LOST: BACK TO THE ISLAND** (out now, Abrams) takes readers through the classic noughties drama one episode at a time, via over 100 essays.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Jeff VanderMeer

We reach out to the author of the Southern Reach books



(C) AZHAR KHAN

What is your daily writing routine like?

It varies depending on the novel. Usually, I write in the morning, but for *Absolution* I wrote almost continuously from when I woke up to when I went to sleep, for six months. At the end of that experience, I had a hefty novel written. So in this case, ecstatic visions and character insights put me in an altered state such that "process" was just... life.

Do you have any knick-knacks on your desk?

A large transparent model of a snail lives at the corner of my desk, along with a tiny edition of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. There's also a moth cocoon that I found in the yard and at first mistook for a hummingbird nest.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing? If so, what kind?

All kinds are helpful, and I like to sequence a soundtrack that conjures the right mood while I'm writing particular scenes. Right now, I'm pretty enraptured by Fontaines DC's *Romance* album, along with music by Tulipomania, Cherry Glazerr, Debby Friday, Oxbow, and Porridge Radio. As for singles, Luke Temple's "More Than Muscle", Gaz Coombes's "Long Live The Strange", "Burnt Pictures" by Audiobooks, and Tamino's "Indigo Night" are on continuous repeat as well.

> **"A large transparent model of a snail lives at the corner of my desk"**

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

Probably *Shriek: An Afterword*, because it included a character commenting on the first person narrator's account, and nonlinear use of time that still had to be structured and logical. Telling a 60-year dysfunctional family history along with a city's history and recounting a war between publishing houses along with the diabolical habits of mushroom people turns out to be "a lot", as they say. Much of that experience helped me layer in history and various voices in *Absolution*.

Got any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

I'm told I overuse the word "brackish".

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

It is all I do.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

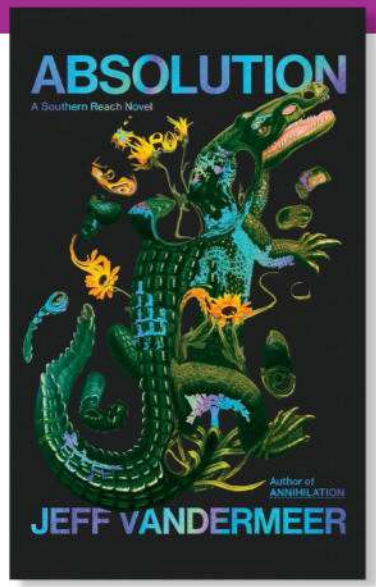
The writers I love make me want to write. They remind me of the joy of reading. They immerse me in such a way that I recall that time before I began to need to analyse everything I read to help me grow as a writer. Encountering a novel I adore is a blessing, not a burden.

Fontaines DC, soundtracking VanderMeer's writing.

TODD OWYOUNG/NBC/GETTY

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

For a time, the *The Weird* anthology I co-edited appeared in greeting card stores in South Africa, next to the top choices for congratulations, weddings and birthdays – purportedly because the owner loved weird fiction.



What's the best gift you've ever received from a reader?

It was a woman who wanted to propose to her girlfriend. They both loved the Southern Reach series, and she sent me copies to personalise to her future wife, in the last of which, *Acceptance*, she asked me to write "Will you marry me?" Thankfully this worked, or at least didn't detract. What's a better gift than that?

Absolution, the fourth book in the Southern Reach series, is out now, published by Fourth Estate.

ABSOLUTE POWER

No More Heroes

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **DC Comics**

Writer **Mark Waid**

Artist **Dan Mora**

ISSUES 1-4 **For any regular readers** of superhero comics, event fatigue is a real problem.

Both Marvel and DC lean heavily on massively sprawling crossover sagas, and keeping up with these can often get exhausting (and expensive), especially given that the latest shocking plot twists will usually just get reset about a year later.

As a result, it's a pleasant surprise when an event comic comes along that feels focused and fun, and which also doesn't outstay its welcome.

Absolute Power is DC's most enjoyable event in a long time: a no-nonsense, old-school superhero blockbuster that delivers a rousing, action-packed adventure across a core miniseries of four oversized issues.

The basic set-up is that intelligence agent and Suicide Squad boss Amanda Waller has had enough of superheroes. Viewing them as a risk to society that needs to be wiped out, Waller manipulates the media with a tidal wave of fake news that turns the world against the idea of costumed crimefighters, and then successfully robs every superhero of their abilities.

The rest of the plot follows the depowered heroes as they go on the run and try to figure out a way to fight back. While there are a large number of additional crossovers (including two supporting miniseries that delve into Waller's origins, and her deadly new "Task Force VII" team), the four-part core series still manages to stand as an enjoyable story in its own right.

It helps having a veteran comics writer like Mark Waid at the helm, who squeezes in some quieter scenes and well-crafted character moments to balance out the ferocious action elsewhere.

He's at his most inventive in the story's first half, ratcheting the tension and the stakes up to an impressive level, but even once the story heads in a more traditional direction as the climax approaches, he still keeps the series both fun and accessible to newcomers.

> **"A no-nonsense, old-school superhero blockbuster"**

Helping significantly are the eye-catching visuals from Waid's regular collaborator on the *Batman/Superman* series, artist Dan Mora. Packing in a dizzying level of energy and style, Mora is one of the most engaging artists to hit the superhero scene in years, and he makes every set-piece feel distinct and memorable.

Ultimately, while *Absolute Power* doesn't reach the heights or match the ambition of DC's greatest event comics, the story's strengths more than outweigh its occasional weaknesses. There are enough thrills and action here to leave any self-respecting superhero fan feeling more than satisfied.

Saxon Bullock

i Waid was originally a comics editor, working at DC in the '80s on major titles like *Wonder Woman* and *Doom Patrol*.

PARANOID GARDENS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Dark Horse Comics**

Writers **Gerard Way, Shaun Simon**

Artist **Chris Weston**

ISSUES 1-4 **Gerard Way, creator** of *The Umbrella Academy* (plus, y'know, occasional international rock megastar) returns to comics with co-writer Shaun Simon, artist Chris Weston, and colorist Dave Stewart for this surreal six-issue series that feels like a throwback to the mind-bending days of DC's Vertigo imprint.

Loo is a care assistant working at Paradise Gardens, a strange (and strangely isolated) retirement home. While most of its residents appear to be human, some of the staff and patients are bizarre creatures – a fact that goes entirely uncommented upon.

Loo has no memory of her life before the facility, but when a superhero is brought in for treatment, that starts to change. Meanwhile, her boss Dr Zerc makes a deal with someone on the outside that will compromise the sanctity of Paradise Gardens forever...

The word "peculiar" isn't quite enough to sum up *Paranoid Gardens* – a weirdo fairy tale that undeniably owes a lot to *The Prisoner* (a "Be seeing you" in issue two feels like a fond tip of the hat).

But while its surfeit of whimsy may be off-putting to some, there's a compelling darkness here too, captured perfectly in Weston's highly detailed and oddly ominous art, and the growing hints of a repressed tragedy in Loo's past that's finally breaking through to the surface.

Will Salmon

WE CALL THEM GIANTS

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Kieron Gillen**
- Artist **Stephanie Hans**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **After the 20** issue-long *Die*, Kieron Gillen and Stephanie Hans have opted for something more compact for their next collaboration.

It starts in familiar post-apocalyptic territory, with teenagers Lori and Annette waking one day to discover that most other people have inexplicably vanished.

With the pair clashing with Droog-style gang The Dogs in their search for food, the narrative initially adopts a grim survivalist tone, before veering off into the fantastical as they encounter some haunting Angela Carter-esque wolves, and a pair of brightly-coloured giant alien humanoids.

Hans allocates several full-page splashes and other large panels to spectacularly depict these gargantuan creatures, but Gillen never reveals the Giants' precise nature or origins, just as he never specifies the geographical setting, or how the extinction event came to pass. Often guided by Hans's expressive linework and sumptuous colours, this is instead a story that unfolds through emotion.

Headstrong and self-destructive, Lori isn't the most sympathetic of protagonists, especially compared to the more naïve Annette. But you can't help feeling for them, especially once they reach the poignantly downbeat ending. This is a tall tale that definitely rings true. **Stephen Jewell**

EC COMICS

Entertaining Comeback

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Oni Press/EC Comics**
- Editors **Sierra Hahn, Matt Dryer**
- Artists **Various**

ISSUES 1-3 **In terms of comebacks,** few come quite as unexpected as EC Comics rising from the grave. The company that pioneered lurid and gorgeously grotesque horror comics, EC was huge in the '40s and '50s before censorship and an anti-comics moral panic (with *Seduction Of The Innocent*, a book by a psychiatrist, claiming that they led to juvenile deliquency) brought their reign to an end.

Now, in league with indie publisher Oni Press, EC is back, bringing its very particular blend of attention-grabbing horror to a modern audience.

Their first two titles are **Epitaphs From The Abyss** ★★★☆☆ and **Cruel Universe** ★★½☆☆, both of which stick closely to the EC formula: they're anthologies with multiple self-contained stories per issue, each of them from a separate creative team, each usually aiming to deliver a ghoulish plot twist. *Epitaphs* is purely horror-themed, complete with three new "horror host" characters to introduce each issue, whereas *Cruel Universe* gives pulpy sci-fi a modern remix, while still going for the same sort of lurid weirdness.

> **"Often feels too much like a nostalgic throwback"**

Both titles are, unavoidably, mixed bags of hits and misses, but the ratio of hits could be higher (especially in *Cruel Universe*, the weakest of the two series). The stories are rarely less than fun, but the ones that stick closest to the traditional EC formula are often the least successful, with the weirder, quieter stories delivering the most impact. The stand-out is *Epitaphs* issue two's "Gray Green Memories", the tale of an amnesiac zombie.

This revival is a great idea in theory, but often feels too much like a nostalgic throwback rather than the daring reinvention that it really needs to be. **Saxon Bullock**

i *Cruel Universe* will change genres after issue five, relaunching as a fantasy anthology called *Cruel Kingdom*.

HERETIC

★★★★★

- RELEASED **6 NOVEMBER**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Robbie Morrison**
- Artist **Charlie Adlard**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **Like a spooky** *Shardlake*, Robbie Morrison and Charlie Adlard's first graphic novel together in over two decades treads a fine line between supernatural horror and a fascinating exploration of real-life witchcraft, demonology and the occult.

Mostly set in 16th century Antwerp, it opens with an intriguing modern-day prologue, in which some ancient journals belonging to renowned scholar Johann Weyer are discovered at London's Freud Museum. They feature several other historical figures, as he's taken under the wing of renowned lawyer and alleged black magician Cornelius Agrippa; the latter's independent-minded daughter Juliette adds a more contemporary edge.

Embroiling the trio in a deadly plot involving crucified priests, the Inquisition and a girl with mysterious stigmata, Morrison constantly ratchets up the tension, deftly balancing his historical research with some gruesome murders. He underplays the fantastical elements until the very end, providing rational explanations for the majority if not all of the strange occurrences.

Adlard's impressive art is mostly rendered in stark black and white, making the brilliant red tones that are added even more effective. As this volume apparently only encompasses the first of the old diaries, let's hope this isn't the last we see of them. **Stephen Jewell**

SILENT HILL 2

Once more, with feeling

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
Reviewed on **PS5**
Also on **PC**
Publisher **Konami**

VIDEOGAME **James Sunderland** returns to the titular town after receiving an impossible letter from his dearly departed wife. Despite the fact that she died three years before, the letter promises that she's still there, waiting for him.

Silent Hill 2 has always been about the desire to return to a moment in time that has long since passed. A standalone horror classic originally released on the PlayStation 2 in 2001, it's remembered in part for its canny leveraging of technical limitations to amplify an atmosphere that clings to you long after you leave the city limits.

So what's left when you bring the nightmare into the realm of 4K? More than just restless dreams. For one thing, refined combat sees you fighting for your life out of renewed terror, rather than frustration. Revised enemy behaviour heightens the tension of every long dark hallway, with Mannequins seeing the biggest overhaul, engaging creepy crawly mode and hiding in plain sight.

Returning composer Akira Yamaoka does more than just sell scares, with his work swinging between skin-crawling industrial tracks and more wistful acoustics. An all-new voice cast play well against this pendulum of emotion, lead actor Luke Roberts a sad-eyed, softly spoken highlight.

Playing the dual roles of Mary and doppelganger Maria, Salóme Gunnarsdóttir seems a lot less comfortable with the motion capture performance set-up. Generally, she leaves us wanting more – especially when she nails a famous scene that will leave you wondering just who is on the other side of those prison bars. It's a remake from the ground up, and new developer Bloober Team hasn't forgotten the fog. In fact, they're so reverential of the source material that we wish they'd taken just a few more risks.

Your haunting tour through the town is lushly realised, with familiar beats brought back from the dead in all their dilapidated, rusted-over glory. However, Bloober are timid with their additions and innovations, frequently still making space to reference the PS2 game's version of events even when making smart revisions.

The 2001 game can't escape the passage of time, but it's still worth playing. However, Bloober has lovingly crafted a modern introduction that's bound to please those returning to this special place, and should do the same for those called to its foggy streets for the first time. **Jess Kinghorn**

i Composer Akira Yamaoka created about nine hours of music for this remake – almost as much as Wagner's *Ring Cycle*.

Don't shoot! Remember the NHS staffing shortages!

DOCTOR WHO: THE SIRENS OF TIME – REDUX

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 5 NOVEMBER
Running time **129 minutes**
Format **CD/download/cassette**
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Twenty-five** years ago the fledgling Big Finish Productions released its first ever officially licensed *Doctor Who* audio drama. *The Sirens Of Time* starred all of the company's returning Time Lords – at that point Peter Davison, Colin Baker and Sylvester McCoy – in a four-part story that took the unusual approach of keeping the three Doctors separate for most of its run, only uniting them in the final episode.

The Sirens Of Time was a slightly shaky start to the range. The story – Gallifrey faces the latest big threat to its existence, and it's all tied to the Doctor's actions at three different points of his life – was steeped in the boring Time Lord bobbins that Russell T Davies would later wisely jettison, and there are truly outrageous accents from some of the guest cast. This "redux" version refashions the material, intercutting between the Doctors and tweaking the music and sound design.

It works pretty well – certainly, switching between the Doctors makes for a more coherent narrative than having, effectively, three episode ones, and the new score is a definite improvement. Ultimately, however, this is still *The Sirens Of Time* – a messy, fun, sometimes frustrating tale that also paved the way for greater things to come. **Will Salmon**

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

The wake agenda

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PS4, Xbox Series X|S, PC**
- Publisher **Sega**

"Waaaait a minute... this isn't a fetch quest, is it?
That's a great idea.
You don't need me there...
It's the whole family.
Maria
I'll make a new sign! This one will have Papa and Miss Fabienne and me and you, all smiling together!

VIDEOGAME **Thanks to its striking** visuals and enthralling story, and an engaging mix of dungeon crawling and social sim goodness, *Metaphor: ReFantazio* is an absolute treat for anyone looking to spend upwards of 80 hours losing themselves in a truly enormous JRPG.

Welcome to the fantasy realm of Euchronia, a world with a slumbering prince (thanks to a curse), a massive discrimination problem, a murdered king and a growing risk of the murderer himself taking the crown. Amid the political upheaval, with a tournament kicking off to help decide the next ruler, our protagonist has a simple goal: break the prince's curse. To do so, he joins the tournament himself, in a move that sees him travelling across the land and gathering allies, all with the hope of society eventually becoming a kinder, more equal place.

Throughout the process, you'll delve into huge dungeons with monsters around every corner, which can be dispatched in turn-based combat or, if they're weak enough, in quick real-time fashion. When you're not doing that, you can hang out with your allies in a manner akin to the *Persona* series' Social Link conversations.

That's just one similarity, as you'll also follow an in-game calendar, balancing objectives with deadlines while fitting in those social elements on the side. The calendar essentially determines the pace of the plot, which feels somewhat slow in the opening sections, even if it does eventually become gripping.

The adventure is enhanced by stupendous style, with bold art direction that seeps into the JRPG's every pore. From the dynamic menus to the world itself, it's hard not to feel a sense of wonder. It's a massive game, which goes all in on style and substance. Stick with it and you'll find a masterclass of storytelling and world-building. **Catherine Lewis**

i Some of the game's monstrous creatures are inspired by Hieronymous Bosch's painting The Garden Of Earthly Delights.

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

BLAKE'S 7

As the '70s TV show makes its HD debut, we test how much intel you have about Roj Blake and his band of freedom fighters

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
What was the name of the rebel group that Blake was involved with before being brainwashed by the Federation?

QUESTION 2
Who composed the theme tune for *Blake's 7*?

QUESTION 3
List all of the original "seven" aboard the Liberator.

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Supply the word which is missing from this grab of the original title sequence.

QUESTION 5
Who wrote the original *Blake's 7* novels *Avon: A Terrible Aspect* and *Lucifer*?

QUESTION 6
What pseudonym did the villainous Servalan use to hide her identity in series four?

QUESTION 7
Which was the only character that appeared in all 52 episodes of the series?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name this character's home planet.

QUESTION 9
Future *Doctor Who* star Colin Baker played a murderous pirate captain in one episode. Name him.

QUESTION 10
After the show's creator Terry Nation, which writer penned the most episodes of *Blake's 7*?

QUESTION 11
Name both of the actors who played Space Commander Travis.

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this, ahem, truly unforgettable episode.

QUESTION 13
Tony Attwood wrote a novel (released in 1984) which continued the story after the events of the final episode of the TV series. What was its title?

QUESTION 14
Who played Blake in 2005's "Blake's Junction 7", a comedy short set at Newport Pagnell service station? (It's on YouTube if you're interested...)

QUESTION 15
Which actor replaced Josette Simon in the role of Dayna for the Radio 4 adventures *The Sevenfold Crown* and *The Syndeton Experiment*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Name this character's home planet.

QUESTION 17
Which diminutive actor played a Decima in "The Web", speed chess expert the Klute in "Gambit", and the titular creature in "Moloch"?

QUESTION 18
Name the inventor who created supercomputer Orac.

QUESTION 19
The series four episode "Rescue" cheekily recycled an old monster costume from *Doctor Who*. But which monster?

QUESTION 20
Name the track by The Orb whose title was inspired by a *Blake's 7* sound effect on a BBC album.

Answers
1 The Freedom Party 2 Dudley Simpson 3 Blake, Vila, Gan, Jenna, Avon, Cally and Zen 4 ELIMINATE 5 Paul Darrow 6 Commissioner Sleer 7 Vila 8 Auron 9 Bayban 10 Chris Boucher 11 Stephen Greif, Brian Croucher 12 "The Harvest Of Kairos" 13 *Afterlife* 14 Johnny Vegas 15 Angela Bruce 16 Gauda Prime 17 Deep Roy 18 Ensor 19 Sea Devil 20 "A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules From The Centre Of The Ultraworld"

How did you do?

What's your mental top speed?

0-5
Standard

6-10
Standard by two

11-15
Standard by six

16-19
Standard by ten

20
Standard by twelve

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SFX

DECEMBER 2024 | Issue 385

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Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
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SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) December 2024, issue 385, is published monthly with an extra issue in December by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK.
Full subscription prices: £71.50 for UK, €158 for Europe, $178 for US, £137 for Rest of World. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.
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"Paul Daniels poking you in the chest after a couple of gins"

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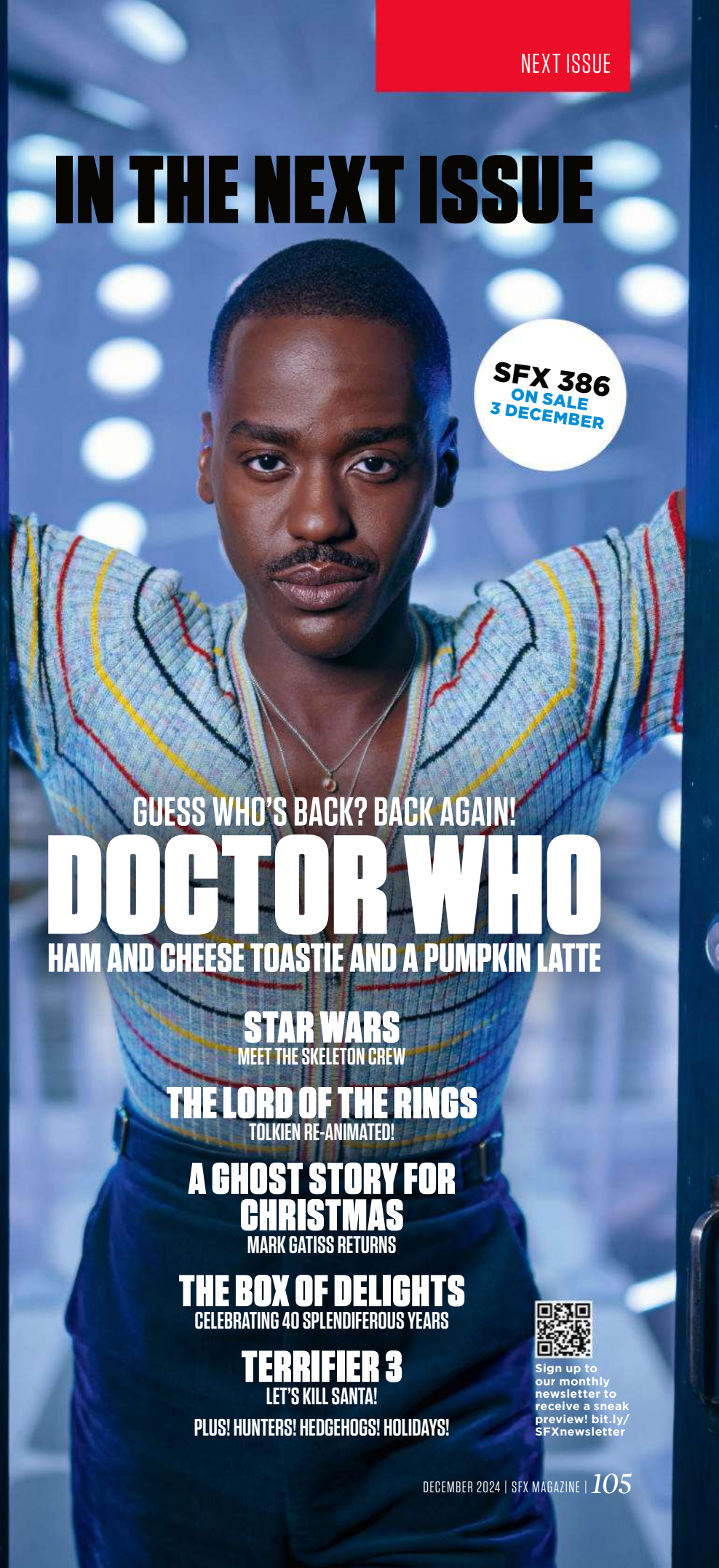

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Robin Williams (Mork) and Pam Dawber (er... Mindy).

Mork & Mindy

Leila Latif, freelance writer

The fifth season of *Happy Days* is best known for two things: the episode where the Fonz literally "jumps the shark" on water skis, coining the term for when a show runs out of ideas; and the episode where an alien comes to visit, "My Favourite Orkan", in which the world was first delighted by the late, great Robin Williams.

It's been just over 10 years since Williams died, and he left us an embarrassment of riches to remember him by: his electrifying stand-up; being the proxy dad to a troubled Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting*; his terrifying performance in *One Hour Photo*. He was the genie, Mrs Doubtfire, and the World's Greatest Dad. But before all that he was Mork, and the old VHSes of off-air recordings of his performance as a sweet-natured alien are just one of the reasons my *own* father is in contention for the world's greatest dad.

Happy Days producer Garry Marshall saw something special in Williams, and while you could put that down to phenomenal foresight, looking back on those tapes it's hard to imagine anyone meeting the comedian and thinking anything other than that he needed to be broadcast to the masses.

The spin-off teamed Mork with Mindy (Pam Dawber), who takes pity on the naïve alien and helps him adjust to life on Earth. The show embraced the complete lack of subtlety of *Happy Days*' latter years, but it worked because of the unwavering commitment of Williams, who – dressed like a rainbow – would improvise many of its most beloved moments. In "Mork And The Family Reunion", when Mindy accidentally eats some "flek" and starts behaving in a distinctly Orkan-like fashion, he gleefully improv-ed a full 22-minute stretch. In season three, meanwhile, the show went full meta, with Mork meeting "Robin Williams" and interviewing him. The show was a gargantuan hit, played in repeats long into my childhood in the '80s and '90s.

Decades later I'd listen to Williams on Marc Maron's *WTF* podcast, reflecting on how difficult he found his new-found stardom, battling substance abuse, and how alienating being viewed as an alien was. Looking back now it's both impressive and heartbreaking that even when he was in pain he sparked such joy in others.

Leila thinks that not hearing screams in space sounds quite relaxing.

Fact Attack!

- When *Happy Days* producer Garry Marshall was asked why he cast Robin Williams, he said "He was the only alien to audition."
- Mork's red spacesuit was apparently a repurposed *Star Trek* uniform from the 1969 episode "The Savage Curtain".
- Mork and Mindy's baby Mearth was played by the late comedian and actor Jonathan Winters, who was Williams's comedy idol.
- A competition was held to name Mork and Mindy's baby, but "Mearth" had already been decided upon. Luckily, someone submitted it.
- Robin Williams only found out that the show had been cancelled after four seasons when he read about it in *Variety* magazine.

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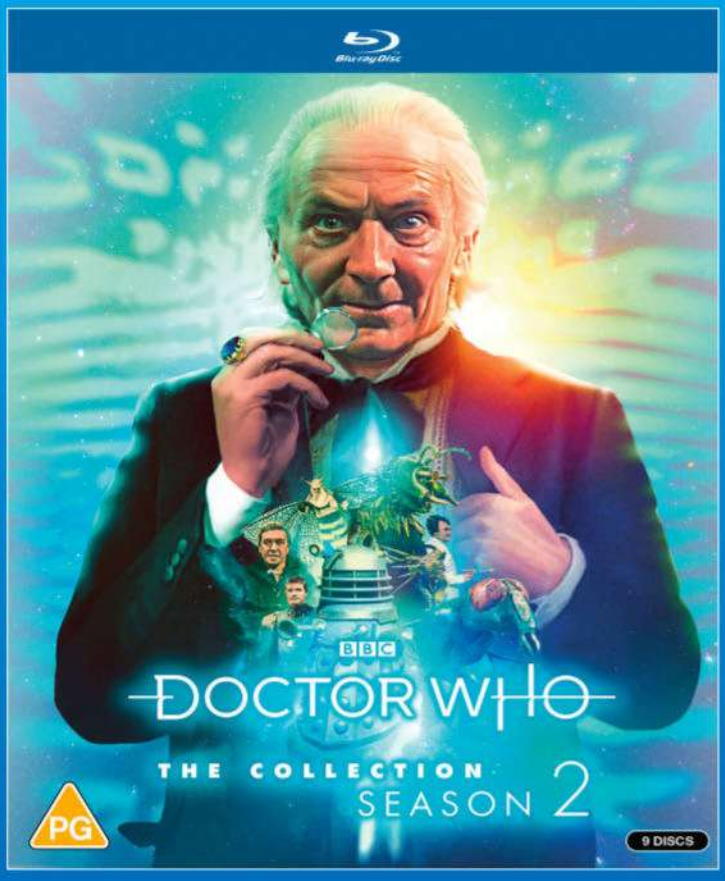

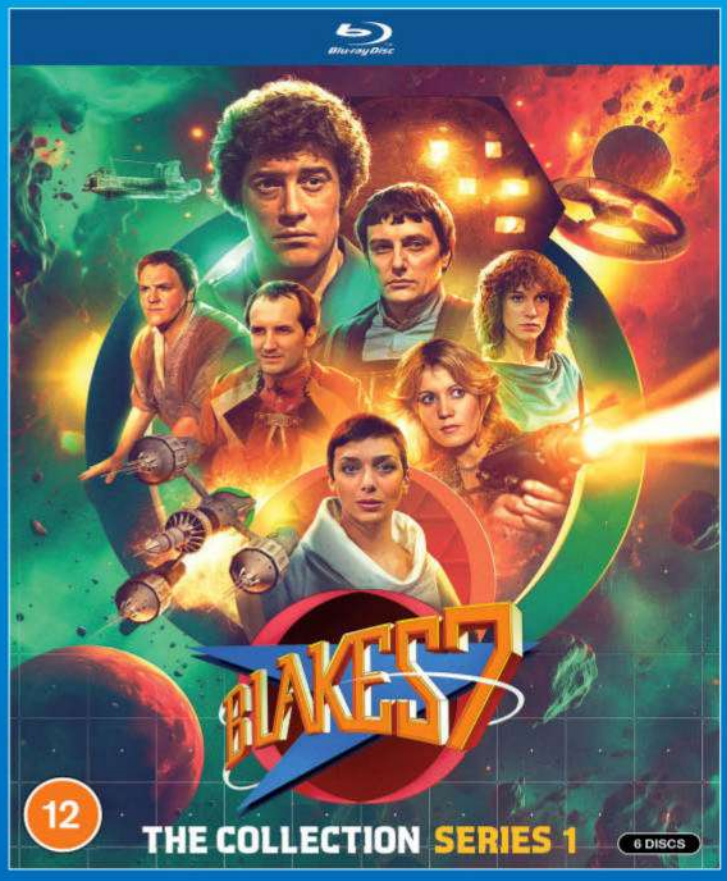

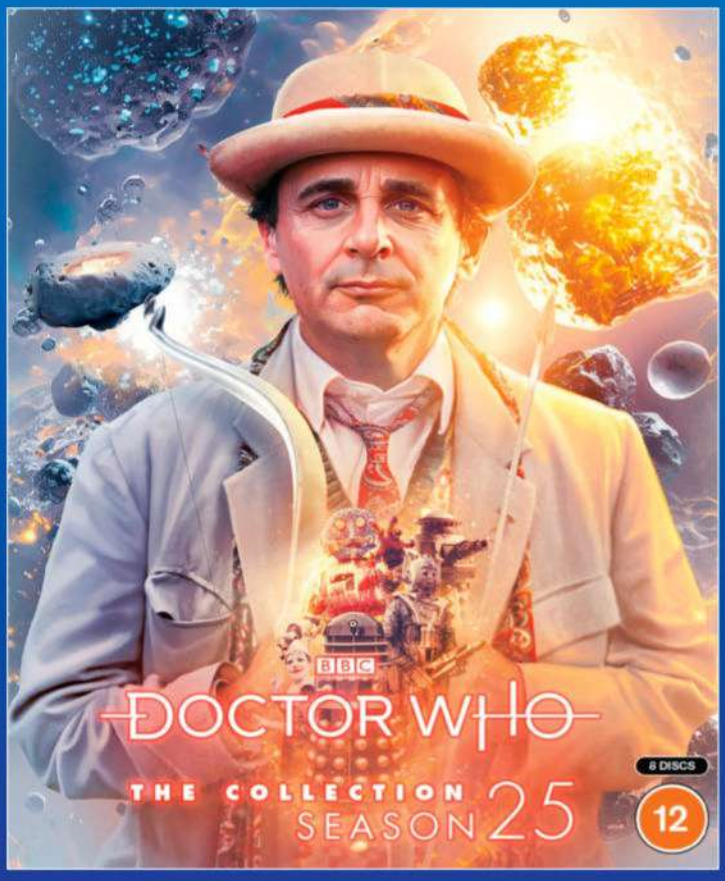

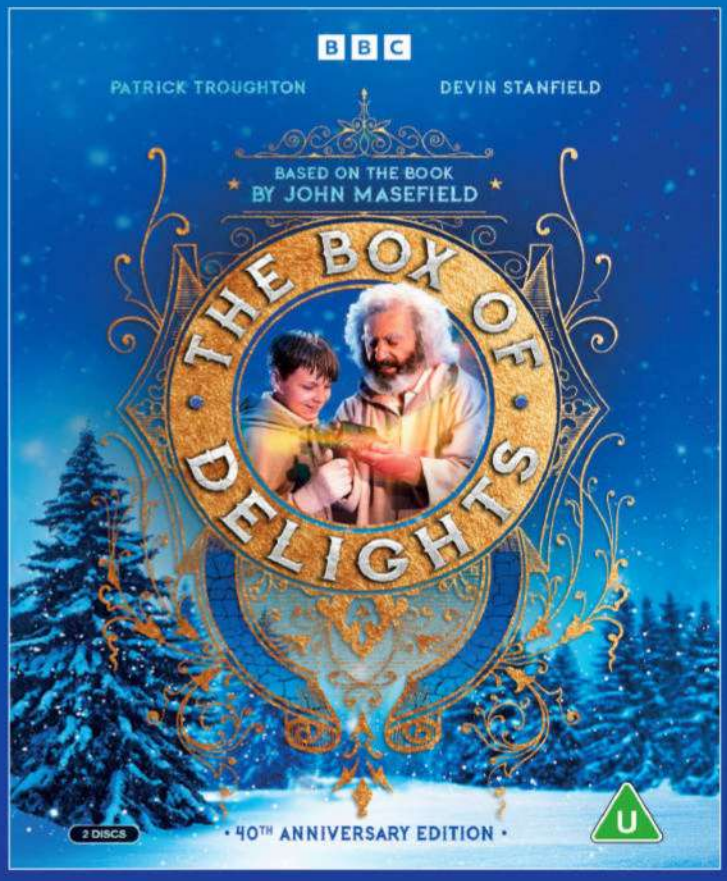

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